DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 103 CE 078 768

AUTHOR Swindell, Richard; Vassella, Ken
TITLE Older Learners Online. An Evaluation of Internet Courses for Isolated Older Persons.
INSTITUTION Griffith Univ. Nathan, Brisbane (Australia).
SPONS AGENCY Australian Dept. of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.
PUB DATE 1999-06-00
NOTE 103p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Computer Uses in Education; *Distance Education; Educational Benefits; Foreign Countries; *Internet; *Older Adults; Pilot Projects; Program Effectiveness; Questionnaires; *Social Isolation; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; Universities of the Third Age

ABSTRACT

Two pilot Internet courses for isolated older adults were developed by the University of the Third Age of the Australian Capital Territory (U3A ACT) in Canberra, Australia, and were offered to 29 older adults selected from a pool of 64 initial registrants from across Australia. Student and tutor input regarding the courses was collected from the following sources: precourse and postcourse questionnaires; telephone interviews during weeks 4 and 5 of the 8-week course; and telephone interviews and written reports from tutors, course and site designers, and administrators. Overwhelmingly, course participants and those involved in developing and delivering the courses believed that the courses provided meaningful experiences for the isolated older Australians enrolled in them, and they called for considerable expansion of the program. (Twenty-six figures are included. Appendixes constituting approximately 60% of this document contain the following: tabulated data; project coordinator's report; respondents' comments about their preferred communication method; advantages and disadvantages of Internet study; problems encountered; ways of improving the U3A ACT courses and Internet study process; comments from the phone survey; comments from two tutors; external review of the courses; University of Canberra reports; Internet course development guidelines and time line; and precourse and follow-up questionnaires.) (MN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 431 103

Older Learners Online

An evaluation of Internet courses for isolated older persons

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

R Swindell

Richard Swindell and Ken Vassella
Griffith University

June 1999

CE 077 748

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Older Learners Online

An evaluation of Internet courses for isolated older persons

Richard Swindell and Ken Vassella
Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland
June 1999

E-mail r.swindell@mailbox.gu.edu.au

This study is part of the U3A ONLINE project, which was funded by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). Their generous support is gratefully acknowledged by the Project Management Group.

Foreword

The processes and events leading to the funding of U3A Online are not important per se to this report. However, there are a number of misconceptions about how and why the project began, and why different personnel and organisations were involved. Dorothy Braxton, a member of the Project Management Group, has written this detailed background explanation to ensure that an accurate version of events is available for those who would like it.

Background to U3A Online

As Australia reaches the end of the 20th century there is a growing recognition of the demoralising effects of social isolation, particularly within the older sector of the community. Because it is largely invisible, it is an issue that until recently has been given scant attention. Being lonely is not something that many people are prepared to admit to; doing something about it seldom captures the imagination of mainstream society.

One organisation that has been well aware of the impact of this situation is U3A, the University of the Third Age, an international movement designed to provide low cost, lifelong learning opportunities for retired people in an informal atmosphere. Under one name or another, U3A now has several millions of members around the world - China's Seniors Universities alone boast one million. In Australia around 38 500 older people regularly participate. No prior qualifications are necessary and no degrees are awarded. Implicit in its philosophy is an understanding of the importance of the social interaction that it provides.

With everyone involved in the U3A movement already in the older age group and, with all of the members being volunteers, many U3As traditionally have a difficult time concentrating their efforts on maintaining activities for their own membership. Even so, in 1998, a number started looking at what they might do for IYOP, the UN International year of Older Persons. One such group was U3A ACT[1] in Canberra. Its Management Committee set up several projects, including giving support to a proposal from one of its members to initiate an Internet project designed to provide isolated people, who could not attend an ordinary U3A, with at least some of the advantages available to those in more fortunate circumstances.

'Isolated', in this instance, was seen as including people with disabilities, those who were confined for the most part to their homes as carers and those who were located in places too far from their nearest U3A. From the beginning it was seen as a national project with the potential to involve existing members internationally in an advisory capacity and as course leaders. And because U3As in both Australia and New Zealand have a close working relationship, groups across the Tasman were always regarded as partners.

The Canberra member directly responsible for the proposal, Dorothy Braxton, sought the cooperation of two other prominent people in the movement, Dr Jack McDonell

[1] U3A ACT - U3A of the Australian Capital Territory

and Dr Rick Swindell. Dr Jack McDonell of Melbourne is one of the 'founding fathers' of U3A in Australia and one of its most distinguished members. Dr Rick Swindell of Griffith University, Brisbane, has long been associated with the organisation and had already initiated an email discussion group for members called U3A Talk. Both were enthusiastic and could see the direction the venture, called Isolated Bytes (IB), could take, eventually, for instance, replacing U3A Talk with an Internet version. Those three formed a Project Management Group, PMG, and then established a wider Project Reference Group (PRG) with representatives from every State and Territory (Western Australia later withdrew). Three experienced members from New Zealand and the UK were also invited to participate. All provided valuable assistance and advice.

However, nothing was easy. All communication had to be by email and no funding arrangements were initially available. To ask U3As themselves to contribute money to a project, the value of which some might not necessarily appreciate or understand, was seen as counter-productive given that most struggle to keep up with the provision of their own resources. To overcome that situation, in the middle of 1998 an approach was made to Senator Kay Patterson (Vic), then the Federal Government's adviser on IYOP affairs. She gave a positive and enthusiastic response with the result that in July the PMG was approached by EdNA, the Education Network of Australia, to discuss a recommendation it was prepared to make which would give Isolated Bytes a grant of $120 000.

EdNA, which is located within the Federal Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, is the prestigious Internet program supported by all State and Territory governments and by the Commonwealth of Australia. Its staff recognised the need to promote both an awareness and use of the Internet by older Australians and to encourage them to make further use of its almost unlimited educational resources. They saw the U3A project as a vehicle for doing that. For its part, the U3A team was more than happy to be associated with such a network. EdNA drew up a policy statement that considerably expanded the original IB concept but was one which ideally suited the longer term thinking of those members of U3A who saw the Internet as an essential adjunct to its programs. The PMG was invited to come up with a proposal which incorporated the policy 'deliverables' and the IB course elements. There was, however, a major constraint. Until the recommendation received the approval of the Minister for Education, (and there was no certainty of that), the discussions were to remain confidential to the three members of the PMG.

The new concept was undoubtedly exciting and opened up many new possibilities for the target audiences but it would also have to be said that the three members who comprised the PMG knew they had on their hands a totally new dimension to deal with. Physically, they were widely separated so could not get together to discuss matters. It would be true to say they went into it with little more than a great deal of optimism and a belief in what they were trying to achieve. They had to rely on telephone conversations and emails, and the goodwill of their own U3As and Griffith University, to meet some of those costs.

Project Funding

EdNA rightly asked how U3A could manage the finances of such a proposal. With no national incorporated U3A body, the IB program had been devised by a group of

enthusiastic individuals thinking along very modest lines, limited in its first stages only to providing online courses and social interaction via email discussions. To overcome issues which they could see would arise, the team, with EdNA's agreement, turned to ALA, Adult Learning Australia Inc., the peak body in Australia for Adult and Community Education which strongly supports Third Age learning, and sought its partnership. ALA's Executive Director, then Dr Alastair Crombie, willingly agreed to help and both he and ALA's Business Manager, Mary Hannan, came onto the PMG. (Following Dr Crombie's resignation from ALA in January 1999, his place was taken by his successor at ALA, Tony Brown.)

For the original three PMG members it was a hectic and worrying 10 weeks with the knowledge that a Federal election was about to be called any time. If that happened before Ministerial approval was received, the project could have been shelved.

Because of the confidentiality agreement, the PMG could not consult with its advisory team (the PRG), so its members had to design among themselves an agreement which was appropriate for the interests of both EdNA and IB. Eventually, in early September, just hours before the Government went into election mode, formal approval was received in a letter from the then Minister for Education, Senator Chris Ellison.

Soon afterwards it seemed obvious that a new name to better describe the enlarged concept was needed and with due regard to simplicity, those involved settled on the new title of U3A Online, with the course aspect retaining the original Isolated Bytes name for identification purposes.

All these points become important in any review of the project because, despite being circulated about it, it was clear that in the early stages some of the Australian U3A membership did not understand the project. Among the country's 128 U3As a minority criticised it for not consulting more widely, despite the wide representation it actually had. Some U3As were reluctant to become involved because they felt they 'did not have the resources to participate'. They failed to appreciate that the only thing they were being asked to do was to help promote the scheme where that was possible. What misunderstandings there have been have almost certainly occurred because many U3As still do not have offices of their own, let alone Internet-connected ones, and computer literacy remains, in many instances, a matter for their individual members. It also needs to be understood that the majority of members in 1998 were not computer users. Now, however, U3A computer courses are among the most eagerly sought after as a generation realises it is missing out on an important and useful technological advance.

Fortunately, today most U3As now see the advantages of U3A Online, and understand better what it is trying to achieve

The Project

With the grant assured, Sandra Duke was appointed as a paid coordinator to run the program on a day-to-day basis, working out of the ALA office in Canberra. Effectively she has been the linchpin, integrating all the different people and components of the project (nationally and internationally) and, in particular, handling all the applications for membership. She may not have been able to offer face-to-face

communication with the IB members, but she does do it screen-to-screen, providing a nice link for many who 'talk' about their isolation and loneliness and their interests with her.

Two U3A course leaders, George Chippendale from Canberra, and Keith Pearson from Melbourne, volunteered to spend the many hours needed to rewrite and teach their normal classes in what, for both, was a new electronic format. Theirs were to be the two pilot courses to be presented and evaluated during the project time frame. Others across Australia, NZ and the UK also began work on more courses to be offered after the trial period was over.

The project team had to embark on a steep learning curve. No one had any knowledge of how to organise virtual courses for older people who might well be quite unfamiliar with using the Internet. International universities and other organisations had been providing online courses for some years, mostly as commercial propositions, but a comprehensive search of the literature, and email exchanges with academics overseas, did not reveal anything which mirrored the U3A proposal.

To help with this aspect, the assistance of the Faculty of Education at the University of Canberra was sought. The Vice Chancellor, Professor Don Aitkin, willingly backed the venture. Further support came from the Canberra-based Internet enterprise, Chirp Web Design, which was appointed to host the website. Its Managing Director, Duncan Crombie, has taken a close personal interest in U3A Online, often stepping in to help members who have problems and offering advice to the PMG as to how best to approach various aspects of the program.

Within a few weeks of opening the IB course membership in late February 1999, isolated people from across the country were expressing their desire to participate. By the beginning of June (when this foreword was written), and with still a month of the DETYA contract to go, around 150 had enrolled. They come from small towns, from the cities and from rural areas. Two are from King Island in Bass Strait.

Remote U3As, which don't have access to the resources of the bigger groups in towns and cities, have asked to join as a group and already one retirement village has been enrolled with enquiries from others. Some U3As have asked if their members could participate in a particular course available online but which they themselves could not offer. The demand is increasing on a daily basis as isolated people say U3A Online participation is 'making a difference' to their lives.

Other groups in Europe and Canada are now known to be establishing similar Internet projects but U3A Online has been given to understand it is still retains the cutting edge.

Dorothy Braxton

3 June 1999

(The names of all persons directly connected with the project can be found in the Acknowledgements.)

Table of contents

Table of figures i

Acknowledgements iii

Executive Summary v

1.0 Introduction 1

2.0 Methodology 3

3.0 Findings 5

3.1 Demographic and general data 5
3.1.1 Age Ranges 5
3.1.2 Gender 6
3.1.3 Isolation Factors 6
3.1.4 Education 9
3.1.5 Occupation 10
3.2 Distance education and computer related information 11
3.2.1 Prior distance education experience 11
3.2.2 Preferred method of course delivery 11
3.2.3 Participants' feelings about Internet learning 12
3.2.4 Information related to computing skills 13
3.3 Course related information 14
3.3.1 Participants' expectations 15
3.3.2 Interest in continuing with Internet study 15
3.3.3 Course duration 16
3.3.4 Weekly time demands 17
3.3.5 Course material perceptions 18
3.3.6 Course format 19
3.3.7 Tutor feedback 20
3.3.8 Communications between course members 21

4.0 Additional Findings 23

4.1 Late and non-starting participants 23
4.2 Passive learners and course auditors 23
4.3 Advantages and disadvantages of studying via the Internet 24
4.4 Non technology-related difficulties 24
4.5 Comments on improving the process and the courses 24
4.5.1 Botany 24
4.5.2 Writing 24
4.6 Development of electronic courses 25
4.7 Reports and comments by tutors 25
4.8 Technical requirements 25
4.8 Project Coordinator's report 26

5.0 Recommendations 27

Appendices - Table of contents

Appendix A: Tabulated data 33
Appendix B: Project Coordinator's report 39
Appendix C: Choice of communication method 43
Appendix D: Advantages of study via the Internet 45
Appendix E: Disadvantages of study via the Internet 47
Appendix F: Problems encountered by participants 49
Appendix G: Participants' suggestions for improving the process 53
Appendix H: Participants' suggestions for improving the course 55
Appendix I: Participants' comments from phone survey 57
Appendix J: Comments by 'Writing Family History' tutor 61
Appendix K: Comments by 'Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment' tutor 65
Appendix L: CHIRP review of U3A ONLINE courses 67
Appendix M: University of Canberra reports 73
Appendix N: Ideas and Guidelines for writing online courses 77
Appendix O: Setting up and running the U3A Online project 83
Appendix P: U3A Online - Major stages and time frames 87
Appendix Q: Pre-course questionnaire 89
Appendix R: Follow-up questionnaire 97

Table of figures

Figure 1: Age ranges of course participants 5
Figure 2: Gender of course participants 6
Figure 3: Population centres from which course participants were drawn 7
Figure 4: Distribution of perceived isolation problems 7
Figure 5: Self-perceived isolation causes for participants form large centres 8
Figure 6: Self-perceived isolation causes for participants from medium centres 8
Figure 7: Self-perceived isolation causes for participants from small centres 9
Figure 8: Participants' formal education levels 10
Figure 9: Prior occupations of participants 10
Figure 10: Distance education experience 11
Figure 11: Preferred method of course delivery - pre and post course 12
Figure 12: Changes in feelings about using the Internet for learning 12
Figure 13: Comfort levels with using a computer, pre and post course 13
Figure 14: Computing related difficulties. 14
Figure 15: Participants' main expectations of courses 15
Figure 16: Level of course satisfaction 15
Figure 17: Interest in doing another Internet course 16
Figure 18: Type of course preferred for future study 16
Figure 19: Perceptions of course duration 17
Figure 20: Changes in study time preferences, pre and post course 17
Figure 21: Time demands of course 18
Figure 22: Amount of course material issued per week 18
Figure 23: Level of difficulty of the material 19
Figure 24: Reaction to the course format 19
Figure 25: Participants' satisfaction with feedback from tutor 20
Figure 26: Method used to communicate with other course members 21

Acknowledgements

Funding: Federal Government, through the Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) and Education Network Australia (EdNA) for the grant to undertake the Project in this United Nations Year for Older Persons.

Project Manager: Adult Learning Australia

Project Management Group:

Dorothy Braxton (U3A ACT)
Jack McDonell (U3A VIC)
Rick Swindell (Griffith University, QLD)
Tony Brown (ALA)
Mary Hannan (ALA)
Alastair Crombie
(former Executive Director, ALA)

Project Co-ordinator: Sandra Duke

Project Reference Group (U3A members)

Dorothy Braxton (Canberra, ACT)
Jack McDonell (U3A Network, VIC)
Rick Swindell (Griffith University, QLD)
Les Betts (Fern Tree Gully, VIC)
Howell Jones (Cairns, QLD)
Bob Bettison (Franklin, NZ)
Aldren Simmons (Christchurch, NZ)
Barbara Foley (Brisbane, QLD)
Marcia Nicholl (Adelaide, SA)
Fred Thornett (Hobart, TAS)
Norman Knight (Sydney, NSW)
Gwen Banks (U3A Council NSW)
Allan Thompson (Darwin, NT)
Jean Thompson (Reading, UK)
Tom Holloway (Warwick, UK)

Course Writers:

George Chippendale	*Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment*
Keith Pearson	*Writing Family History*
Ian Wilson	*Continents on the Move*
Mel Davies	*The Life and Times of Henry Lawson*
Jean Thompson	*Design for Living*
George & Lisl Singer	*Jogging the Brain*
Margaret Allen	*Comparative Religions*
Robert Comrie	*Genealogy*
Byron Soulsby	*Introduction to Astronomy*

Project Evaluation: Rick Swindell and Ken Vassella

Electronic Course Preparation:
Prof. Don Aitkin, Vice Chancellor, University of Canberra, Associate Prof. Barbara Chambers and Dr Noel Vanzetti and their team at the University of Canberra

Editorial Assistance: Bess Flores - Adelaide

Technology: Duncan Crombie and his team at CHIRP Web Design

The combined talents of all the above have contributed to the successful fruition of this project, and their involvement and support is gratefully acknowledged.

Executive Summary

This evaluation reports on a wide range of activities, perceptions and suggestions that relate to the development and delivery of the two pilot courses that were used to gauge the potential of the Isolated Bytes (IB) concept.

In essence, the IB concept is a University of the Third Age (U3A) without walls. The program involves older volunteers in writing intellectually challenging courses and delivering these, via the Internet, to older people who are isolated by distance or circumstance. Extensive literature searches, and e-mail discussions with researchers in other parts of the world who are involved in multimedia developments, suggest that IB is a unique program. To date it also appears that there have been no published studies that report on the characteristics and aspirations of older persons who want to learn via the Internet. It seems likely therefore, that the findings in this report could be of interest to a wide audience including policy makers, practitioners and adult education theorists.

Quantitative findings in this report are based on data provided by 29 participants who completed an eight-week course delivered via the Internet and who responded to the pre and post course questionnaires and a mid-course telephone survey.

In brief, the pilot program has been highly successful. Specifically, the study found the following:

- The majority of participants (72%) were women and most were aged over 65. This finding will be of interest to the National Office for Information Economy, which has recently set up a women and IT advisory group to develop strategies for encouraging women to better access new technologies. Programs like IB could become exemplars of the kind of Internet-based resource that demonstrate to older women some of the benefits that derive from using computer-based technology.
- A major objective of IB is to provide opportunities for isolated older people to take part in intellectually stimulating activities of a kind that are readily available to non-isolated older people. Self-perceived isolation was the main isolating feature shared by almost all the participants, in fact more than half lived in large cities yet they still considered they were isolated. For all categories of self-reported isolation:
    - 40% related to distance or transportation problems
    - 40% related to disability or health problems
    - 13% related to caregiver roles
    - 7% related to other problems such as no one in the locale with similar interests.

Self-perceived isolation exists in many forms as illustrated by the following statements from participants.

> *"I live in* [suburb of large city] *with bad bus service...do not have a car nor use taxis. Have no family support....Have become more disabled and in constant pain over the past couple of years"* (extract from preliminary survey).
>
> *"I care for my wife who has Alzheimers. Have done so for the last 8 years"* (extract from preliminary survey).
>
> *"I live in a rural community....Nearest U3A is 139 km away. Carer for husband. Limited access to TAFE...30 km* [away]*"* (extract from preliminary survey).
>
> *"I live on* [an island]. *Access to facilities of the city is by ferry and taxi. Most nights of the week there is no evening travel available"* (extract from preliminary survey).
>
> *"I live in a large city....Because I never know how I am going to feel from day to day* [my health] *stops me committing myself to a set routine like going to class"* (extract from preliminary survey).
>
> *"Nowadays, living alone and physically limited, I was being stupefied by knitting, crochet, patchwork, computer puzzles, reading, letter writing and occasional bus trips. There is a limit!"* (extract from a Members' Forum item).

Nearly 21% had minimal formal schooling, having left school at primary level or after some secondary school experience. This suggests that programs like IB may prove to be attractive to older Australians who were denied the opportunity in earlier life to continue with their education.

Nearly 76% were professionals, paraprofessionals or businesspersons during their working careers. The remainder (24%) was from areas not normally well represented in adult education programs like farming, the trades, homemaking and unskilled labouring.

Course-related findings

The majority of participants:

- showed a thirst for further knowledge both course-specific and generally;
- had, by the end of the course, shown a preference for learning via the Internet, either fully or in combination with other methods;
- were interested in continuing with Internet learning either immediately or at some future date;
- felt that the courses met their expectations and that they were happy with course format;
- considered the course duration of 8 weeks to be about right;

- considered the weekly time demands to be about right;
- considered the amount of course material issued per week to be about right; and,
- considered the level of difficulty of the material to be about right.

The overall feeling of the participants about their course experiences is summed up in the following extracts:

> *"Many thanks to you for my being able to enjoy what has turned out to be the most pleasurable weeks of my life."*
>
> *"Thank you for the opportunity to work through this programme.... I have really enjoyed the course and I am sorry it is over. It has inspired me to push on, further afield."*

Conclusion

The Isolated Bytes program has the potential to reduce isolation and improve a sense of wellbeing among many older Australians. Isolation in older age is caused by many factors particularly those associated with poor health and disability, both of which increase rapidly in older age. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that half the population aged 65 and over has some form of disability. Moreover, isolation can lead to poor health - some researchers report that social isolation is as great a risk to health as smoking.

The success of the IB trial shows that the Internet can provide meaningful experiences for groups of like-minded, isolated older Australians. It is recommended that the program be considerably expanded.

1.0 Introduction

U3A Online is a recently completed Web site comprising resources and services to support the rapidly growing University of the Third Age (U3A) movement in Australia and New Zealand. A novel component of U3A Online is the Isolated Bytes (IB) site, which is the first "U3A without walls" for isolated older people. This report outlines findings from an evaluative study of the two pilot courses, Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment, and Writing Family History, to be offered first under the IB program.

Findings in this report are based on information provided by all the major players in the process including course participants, course writer/tutors, electronic course developers, the Web-site designers, and key program administrators.

The 29 course participants who provided the majority of information outlined in this report were selected from an initial pool of 63 volunteers from different parts of Australia, who comprised the first members to join IB. To be eligible for IB, members need to met the following three criteria:

- they are, or would be, eligible to join a "conventional" U3A if this were available nearby;
- they consider themselves to be isolated in some way (e.g., distance, illness, acting as a care-giver etc.); and,
- they have ready access to a computer with Internet connection.

An extensive literature search was undertaken using standard library and Internet procedures, with a view to integrating the findings from this study with previous work. Electronic databases through the Library Services at Griffith University [ATSIROM AEI-ATSIS (Education), AUSTROM AEI (Education) ERIC and Sociological Abstracts] were searched. A number of descriptors were used some singly and others in combination including (older adults, seniors, U3A, Seniornet, third age, older persons, learning/learners, education, courses). A search was made over the World Wide Web using a number of search engines (Alta Vista, Excite, Netscape and Yahoo). Where available advanced searches were used using the same descriptors as above. These searches revealed little. To date, it would appear that nothing has been published in readily accessible literature relating to older persons' learning on the Internet.

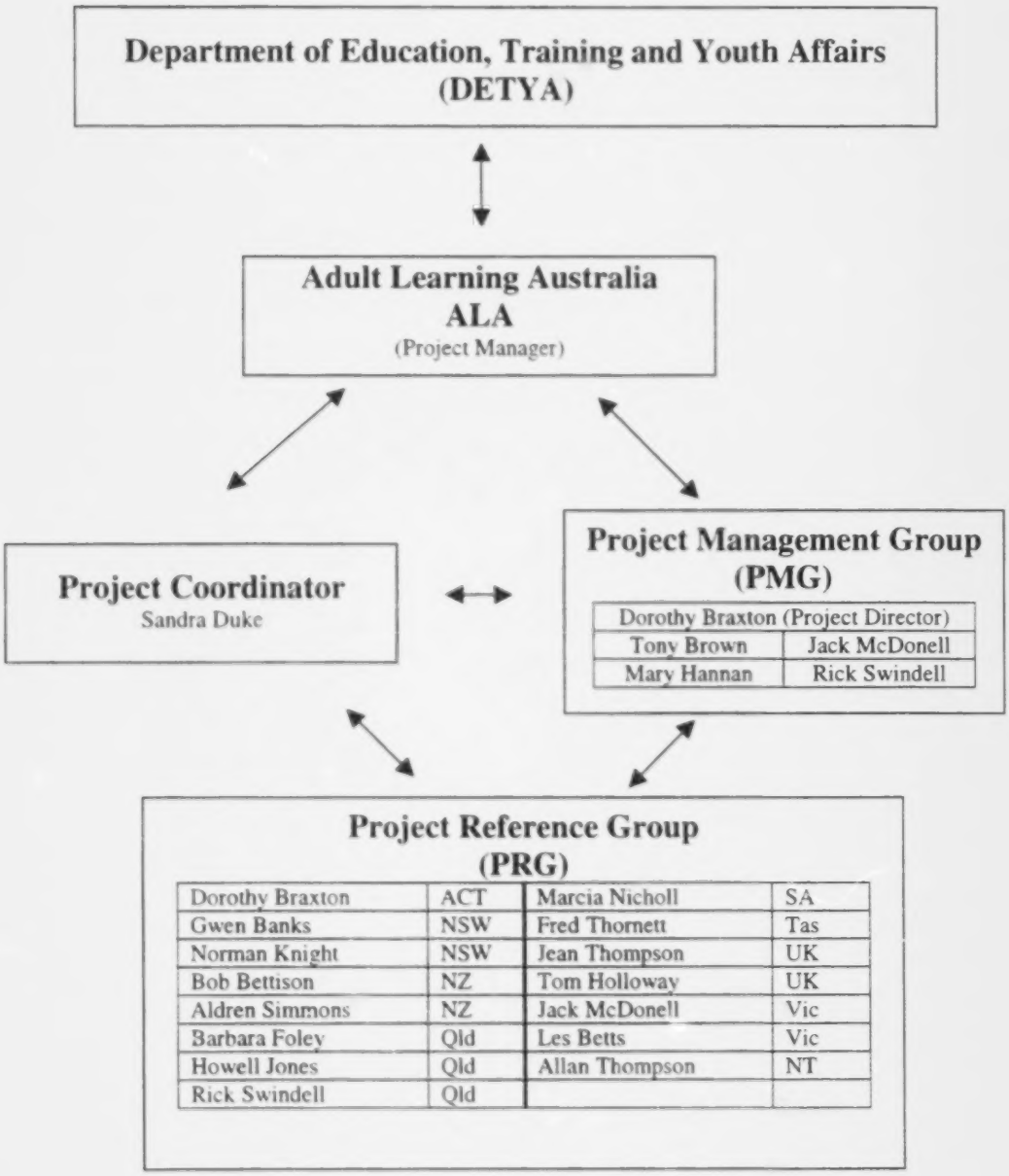
Similarly, e-mail contact with overseas researchers in Internet learning revealed little. Researchers were e-mailed explaining the nature of the IB project and requesting any information or names of people they might know of who were working in the area of electronic learning for older people. These e-mails led to other contacts, none of which produced any information germane to this study. A number of promising sounding leads proved merely to be descriptions of programs or evaluations of courses for older people dealing with computing skills and the use of the Internet. Apart from these a number of sites offer Internet learning for seniors but courses were not specifically written and taught by seniors, and no evaluation details were available.

This appears to be the first study of older people learning via the Internet. As such it will provide important information to policy makers and adult education theorists, as well as to practitioners who may be planning to develop similar electronic programs, about the potential of the Internet to reach out to older persons in geographically and socially isolated circumstances.

Throughout this report acronyms of key management groups involved with the project are frequently used. The following diagram may assist with understanding the structure.

U3A ONLINE Project Structure

[Isolated Bytes (IB) is the course component of U3A ONLINE]



Dorothy Braxton	ACT	Marcia Nicholl	SA
Gwen Banks	NSW	Fred Thornett	Tas
Norman Knight	NSW	Jean Thompson	UK
Bob Bettison	NZ	Tom Holloway	UK
Aldren Simmons	NZ	Jack McDonell	Vic
Barbara Foley	Qld	Les Betts	Vic
Howell Jones	Qld	Allan Thompson	NT
Rick Swindell	Qld		

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Data collection

Tutors limited the number of participants in the two pilot courses to 34. These were selected from a pool of 64 initial registrants from all Australian States and Territories. As a condition for course selection participants were advised that they would be asked to provide information about their backgrounds, and experiences with Internet learning.

Before the course began each participant was sent an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the study, together with a copy of the pre-course questionnaire and a reply paid envelope. During weeks 4-5 of their eight week course each was interviewed by telephone. Following the course each was sent a post-course questionnaire and reply paid envelope. In order that valid comparisons could be made between pre and post course experiences only those who had given information in all three stages of the survey was included in the data analysis. Of the original 34, four were excluded because they failed to return the post-course questionnaire in time for data analysis; one person never started the course, leaving 29 full sets of responses for analysis.

2.2 Research instruments

1. The pre-course questionnaire consisted of 21 questions, some with sub-sections, comprising a selection of Likert-scale and open-response questions (Appendix Q).

2. Telephone interviews were held during the fourth and fifth weeks of the eight-week courses. Questions were left relatively open ended to elicit details that may not have been considered in designing the questionnaire format.

3. The post-course questionnaire consisted of 23 questions, a number of which replicated questions asked earlier (Appendix R).

2.3 Additional information

Additional information was obtained from telephone interviews and/or written reports from tutors, course and site designers, and administrators; remarks posted to open interactive site areas; and e-mail messages.

2.4 Data analysis

Numerical data was entered directly into SPSS for Windows Version 8. Non-numerical data were examined and collated into categories and entered into the statistical package. Anecdotal material was sorted into categories and summarised.

Analysis of data was carried out using the SPSS summarising facilities of frequency counts and cross tabulations.

Excel Spreadsheets were used to aid in some collating of information and for the production of charts.

3.0 Findings

Each of the courses was heavily oversubscribed. Course tutors placed a limit on participant numbers (botany 20, writing 14) based primarily on the perceived amount of time needed to interact with students. Participant data in this chapter refer only to the 29 course members (85%) who remained with their course for the full 8 weeks and who complied with all data-gathering steps (i.e., completing pre and post course questionnaires, and telephone interviews). This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section discusses demographic and general findings about the kind of older person who might be attracted to learning via the Internet. The second section relates to participants' general readiness to use the Internet and their technological readiness for the IB program. The final section focuses on some of the specifics of participants' experiences with their courses. For ease of interpretation the data in this chapter have been summarised in graphical format. Numerical data can be viewed in Appendix A.

3.1 Demographic and general data

3.1.1 Age Ranges

Other than the criterion that members of Isolated Bytes (IB) would be eligible to join a "conventional" U3A group if this were available nearby, no age limit was placed on membership. Figure 1 shows the age ranges of the course participants.

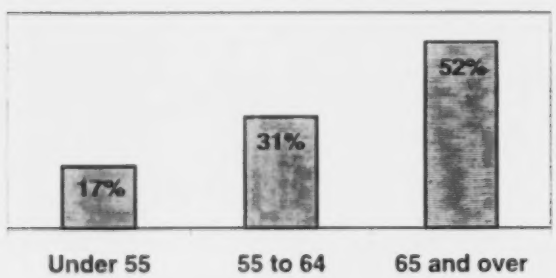


Figure 1: Age ranges of course participants (n=29).

Fifty-two per cent of participants were in the older age grouping of 65 years and over. This is an important finding for program planners because one of the main objectives of IB is to provide intellectually challenging programs for socially isolated older persons. The likelihood of social isolation tends to increase sharply in later life. Therefore, the high percentage of older learners in this pilot program offers support for the idea that Internet-based programs have the potential to assist older people who would benefit from developing new social networks.

3.1.2 Gender

Figure 2 shows the distribution by gender in each of the two pilot courses.

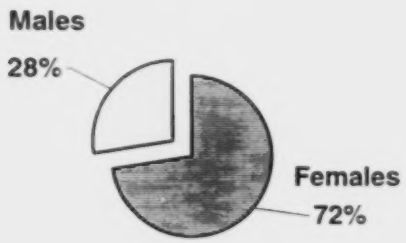


Figure 2: Gender of course participants (n=29).

The majority of participants were females (72%), with males comprising slightly more than one quarter (28%) of the total. A much larger proportion of females (92%) was attracted to the writing course than the botany course (59%).

The high proportion of older women attracted to the pilot IB courses is likely to be of interest to policy makers who are concerned with the low take up by women of Internet technology. For example, an agenda item for a recent Commonwealth/State Ministers' Conference on the Status of Women (May, 1999) showed that Australian males have higher rates of computer ownership and Internet usage than Australian females in all age ranges. Older Australian females are particularly at risk, with only 5% aged 55 and over using the Internet compared with 12% Australian males in the same age range. The gender imbalance is of sufficient concern that the National Office for Information Economy (NOIE) has set up a women and IT advisory group for On Line Australia to develop projects to encourage women to better access new technologies.

The gender breakdown shown in Figure 2 makes an interesting comparison with the NOIE findings even though IB is drawing from the pool of older women and men who are already attuned to the advantages of the Internet. The high proportion of older more women attracted to the courses, particularly the writing course, suggests that Internet courses could be tailored specifically to meet the interests of older women. Those courses could then be used as "draw cards" to demonstrate to older women some of the advantages of mastering computer-based technology.

3.1.3 Isolation Factors

A criterion for IB membership was that participants experience some measure of isolation. The definition of isolation was left up to the individual but it could include items like perceived isolation through distance, illness, personal circumstance such as caring for a relative, or some other individual circumstance. In this pilot stage of the program, people who were interested in joining the courses but who were not isolated (e.g. U3A members who could take part in conventional face-to-face U3A activities), were not eligible to take part.

Many older Australians live in small communities or in areas that are an appreciable distance from large communities that can provide a range of adult education and other leisure and support organisations for older people. Conceivably, then, IB is the kind of program that could help bridge the "tyranny of distance" experienced by geographically isolated older persons. Figure 3 shows the range of population centres from which participants were drawn.

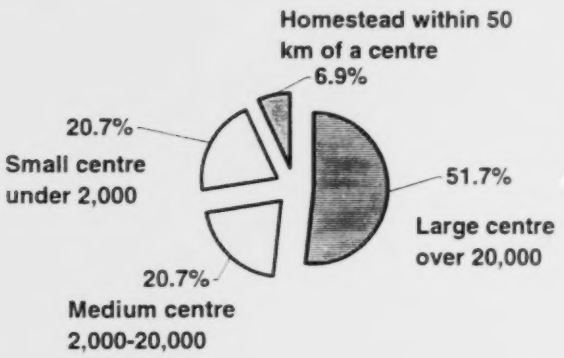


Figure 3: Population centres from which course participants were drawn (n=29).

As Figure 3 shows, only two of the participants (6.9%) came from moderately geographically isolated circumstances (a homestead within 50 km of a population centre), and none came from the most isolated circumstance (more than 50 km from a centre). One explanation for the lack of involvement by people from remote Australia may be to do with the fact that the IB program was devised and implemented within a very short time period. There was little time for advertising and explaining the new IB concept before the courses were scheduled to begin. It will be interesting to see whether future courses attract greater numbers of geographically isolated participants once the aims of IB are more widely known.

The majority (51.7%) of course participants came from large population centres, suggesting that self-perceived isolation is a more important consideration than geographical isolation. In order to understand more about participants' perceptions of isolation they were asked to briefly describe their circumstances and particularly, why they felt isolated. The main themes were then extracted from these descriptions and these are summarised in Figure 4.

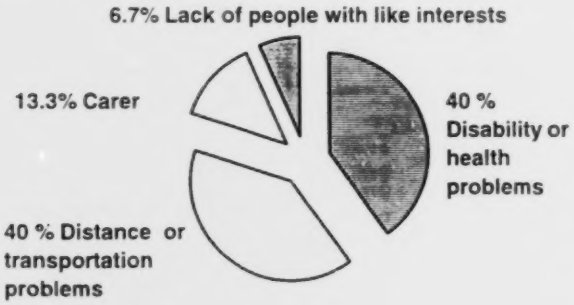

6.7% Lack of people with like interests
13.3% Carer
40 % Disability or health problems
40 % Distance or transportation problems

Figure 4: Distribution of perceived isolation problems (n=45).

In total, 45 items were listed as contributing to participants' sense of isolation and these were grouped into the four categories shown in Figure 4. Forty per cent of the problems were distance or distance-related, such as poor public transport and no longer driving.

Disability and poor health were cited as the other major causes of isolation (40%). In general, disability and poor health increase with age. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that half the population aged 65 and older have some form of disability, chiefly arthritis, circulatory disease and hearing loss. However, disability and ill health experienced by others also forces many older people, particularly women, into the role of caregiver. Figure 4 shows 13% of the isolation problems were associated with caregiver roles such as caring for sick or disabled partners or friends, or caring for grandchildren. Six of the 29 participants (21%) were in caregiver roles.

The smallest grouping (6.7%) felt that there were no people with like interests in their area.

Figures 5-7 further explore this isolation theme by examining the distribution of different types of causes of isolation within the main population categories.

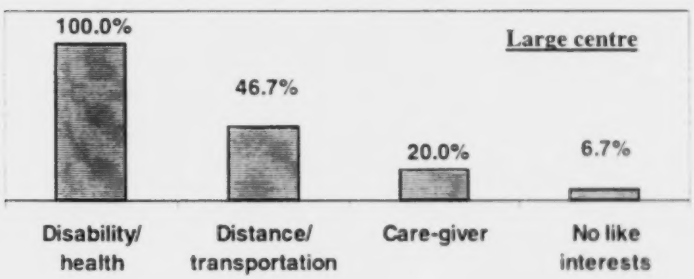


Figure 5: Self-perceived isolation causes for participants form large centres (n=15).

Fifteen participants lived in cities with populations above 20,000 and all (100%) cited a disability or health problem as contributing to their sense of isolation. In addition, nearly half the group (46.7%) felt isolated by distance or lack of suitable transportation. Twenty per cent were restricted by their caring role, with sick partners or grandchildren, and one person (6.7%) had no one in the area with whom they could share their interests.

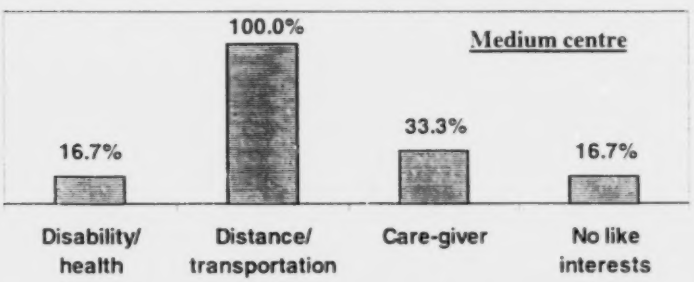


Figure 6: Self-perceived isolation causes for participants from medium centres (n=6).

All six participants living in medium centres (2,000-20,000 population) reported distance or transportation problems and two of these were restricted by their roles as caregivers. One person cited disability or poor health and one a lack of people with like interests.

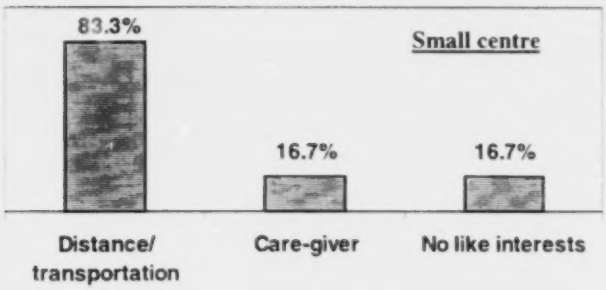


Figure 7: Self-perceived isolation causes for participants from small centres (n=6).

In small centres (less than 2,000 population) distance or transportation problems were seen as a problem by all but one of the group. One cited caregiver responsibilities and one a lack of people with like interests.

Two participants lived in homesteads within 50 km of a centre and their sense of isolation was transportation related.

The above findings underscore an important aspect of ageing, namely that many older people, even those who live in large cities, experience a sense of isolation that is often not recognised by the majority of the community. It would appear that programs like IB have the potential to make an important contribution to the well-being of older Australians, many of whom experience an increasing sense of isolation with age, despite their living in seemingly well serviced and well resourced communities.

3.1.4 Education

Formal education level is a predictor of whether a person is likely to take part in adult education activities. Generally, the higher the level of formal education the higher the likelihood of participation. To determine whether participants in IB had similar educational backgrounds to those found from most adult education studies (i.e., they tended to come from educationally advantaged backgrounds), participants were asked to nominate, from a list of options, their highest level of formal education completed. Formal education levels are shown in Figure 8.

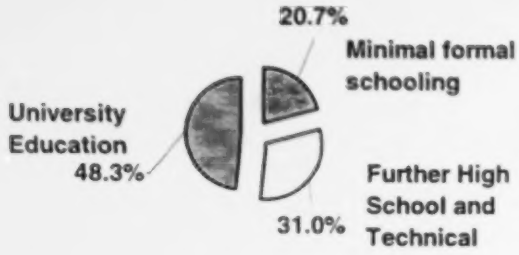


Figure 8: Participants' formal education levels (n=29).

The majority or participants (79%) had completed high school or better and are clearly from a more advantaged educational background than the average older Australian. Most people who are likely to be attracted by programs like IB would have experienced their compulsory schooling during post Great Depression and World War 2 days when compulsory education would have concluded at the end of primary school. However, six course members (21%) had minimal formal education backgrounds. This suggests that programs like IB may prove attractive to older Australians who were denied the opportunity in earlier life to continue with their education.

3.1.5 Occupation

Participants were asked to describe their occupation prior to retirement. This specific information was sorted into the generalised categories shown in Figure 9.

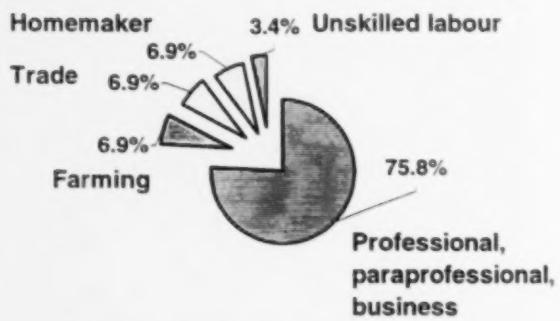


Figure 9: Prior occupations of participants (n=29).

The majority of participants (76%) came from the professional, business or managerial sphere. However, an appreciable number (24%) came from backgrounds that are not normally well represented in voluntary adult education programs that involve intellectually challenging activities. Program planners need to bear in mind that the study sample was small, and it was selected from an unusual population (namely older persons who are Internet users). With these caveats in mind it will be interesting to see whether programs like IB are, indeed, attractive to appreciable numbers of older people whose career backgrounds did not encourage participation in adult education programs.

In summary, IB has attracted an appreciable percentage of isolated older women, which is a target group recognised as being potentially disenfranchised by new technologies. In addition, the program has attracted appreciable numbers from areas not normally well

represented in adult education programs namely, those with minimal formal education and those from non-professional backgrounds.

3.2 Distance education and computer related information

A number of questions focused on participants' perceptions of learning at a distance and using new communications technologies. The findings are discussed in this section.

3.2.1 Prior distance education experience

Participants were asked whether or not they had previously taken part in any distance learning activities. Responses are shown in Figure 10.

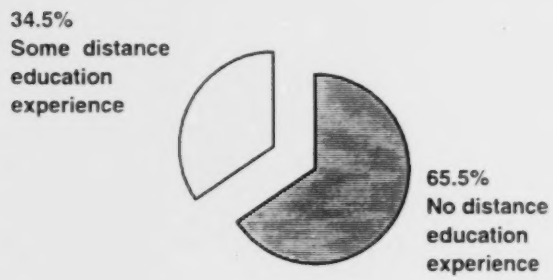


Figure 10: Distance education experience (n=29).

Nearly two thirds of participants had had no prior experience of learning at a distance. These participants would have needed to make the adjustment to working to a self-imposed schedule without the tutor and peer support systems that characterise most conventional face-to-face courses. The very low dropout rate in both courses and the very positive feedback on the courses (discussed later) suggests that most participants had little difficulty in adjusting to the discipline of distance learning.

3.2.2 Preferred method of course delivery

Participants were asked to nominate their preferred method for course delivery from four given options. These were: all face to face with tutor and colleagues; some face to face with some distance education methods; all by distance education but using a mixture e.g., print, video, phone and computer; and, all by computer. This question was asked in both the pre and post course questionnaires and difference findings are summarised in Figure 11.

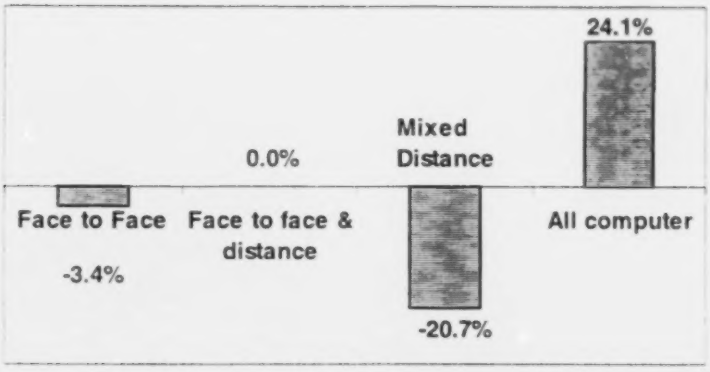


Figure 11: Preferred method of course delivery - pre and post course (n=29).

Difference graphs, as shown here and elsewhere in the report, were obtained by counting the number selecting a specific option in the post-test questionnaire and subtracting from this the number selecting the pre-test questionnaire results. A negative number shows that support for an item had dropped by the end of the eight-week course. By courses' end nearly a quarter of the participants (24.1%) had switched their preferences to all learning by computer, from all face-to-face learning (a decline of 3.4%) and mixed distance methods (a decline of 20.7%). This appears to be a very encouraging finding for supporters of online learning because it demonstrates that well developed, well managed Internet programs for older learners can satisfy the majority of program delivery needs. At the conclusion of the course 62% stated a preference for learning by computer alone. However, not all responses showed an increase in preference for learning by computer. Nearly 7% who had indicated 'all computer' in the pre-test changed to 'mixed distance', and the same percentage went from 'mixed distance' to 'face to face and distance'.

3.2.3 Participants' feelings about Internet learning

Participants were asked to indicate their feelings about learning via the Internet from a choice of 5 options ranging from very fearful to very eager. A similar question was asked in the post-questionnaire. Results are shown in Figure 12.

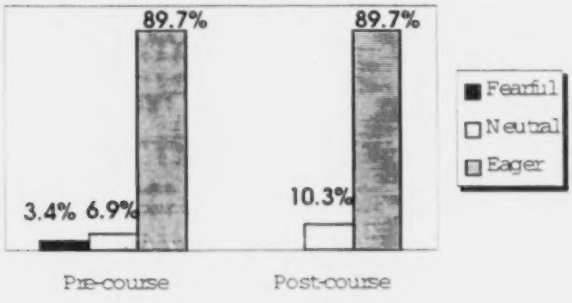


Figure 12: Changes in feelings about using the Internet for learning (n=29).

The number of participants reporting being eager or very eager about Internet learning was high (90%) both before and after the 8-week course. This is an encouraging

finding for program administrators because, despite the fact that this was the first time any of the participants had experienced on-line learning, and only about one third had prior experience of distance learning, levels of enthusiasm for the medium remained high. However, the data are not as straightforward as they might seem. Crosstabulations (shown in Appendix A) showed that some had downgraded their preferences from very eager to eager, while others had upgraded their preferences. Although participants were not asked to explain why their preferences had changed it seems likely that minor difficulties with the technology (as discussed later) may have tempered some of their initial enthusiasm. The one person, who was initially fearful about the prospect of Internet learning, subsequently changed to eager.

The data in this section paint a positive picture of older persons' preparedness to experiment with new technologies to improve their quality of life.

3.2.4 Information related to computing skills

No preliminary screening of participants' computer technology skills was undertaken. However, IB members were required to register via U3A Online and to provide some background details to the Project Coordinator by e-mail. It was assumed that those who could carry out these tasks would also have the necessary computer skills to access their course and interact with their tutors. It was also assumed that, if participants initially showed some trepidation about learning with computers, their comfort levels with the computer would increase as the course progressed. To determine whether there was a change in computer comfort levels participants were asked to rate their comfort levels on a 5 point scale ranging from very uncomfortable to very comfortable, before and after the course. Results are shown in Figure 13.

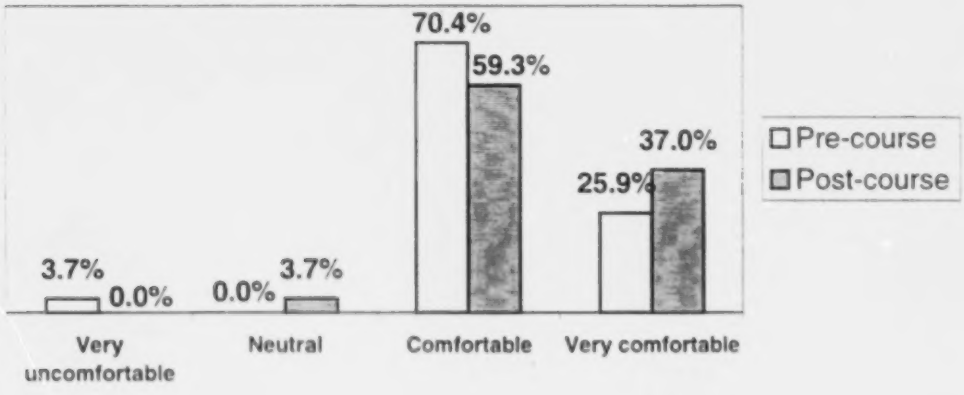


Figure 13: Comfort levels with using a computer, pre and post course (n=27).

Participants' comfort levels with using computers were high (96%) both before and after the course with all but one person indicating that they felt comfortable or very comfortable with computers. By the end of the course 37% reported that they were very comfortable with computers. This was an increase of 11%, all of which had come from the initially comfortable group.

In the telephone survey conducted during the fourth and fifth weeks of the course, participants were asked to identify what, if any, course-related computing problems they were encountering during their course (Appendices F & I). Individual machine difficulties are not course-related so these are not included in this report. The three main kinds of problem are shown in Figure 14.

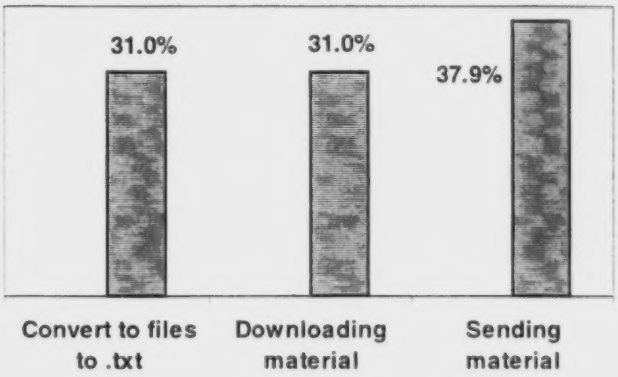


Figure 14: Computing related difficulties.

The three main types of computing problems involved: converting word processing files into .txt format so participants could send their work to the tutor; downloading material from the lessons to allow off-line reading and reflection; and, posting participant prepared materials to various electronic sites for other course members to see.

Each of these problems was not, of itself, serious and was reported more as a source of personal difficulty than as a major obstacle to participation. Minor design problems resulting in uncertainty about where and how participants could display their materials were recognised early in the course by the tutors and electronic designers, and appropriate modifications have been suggested for future offerings.

Problems encountered by the participants' unfamiliarity with tasks such as saving files as text files, or attaching files to e-mail could be very simply overcome. One way of doing this might be to have simple step-wise instructions posted on the web site, with a link to these as needed. Another way might be to have "computer tutors" who, for example, might be a small cadre of U3A volunteers who could be contacted for assistance by e-mail, as the need arises. The computer tutors could be U3A volunteers from anywhere in the world. This idea, if it were practicable, could have other strengths to recommend it because it would provide socially isolated participants with yet another friendly link to the outside world.

3.3 Course related information

This section covers information relating to participants' perceptions of the courses. Although some of the findings are quite specific they have been included here because they may be of value to course planners and educational theorists who want to know more about the characteristics and aspirations of older persons who are attracted to electronic learning.

3.3.1 Participants' expectations

Participants were asked to think back about why initially they had joined IB and to give reasons for selecting their particular course. Their responses were grouped into the broad categories shown in Figure 15.

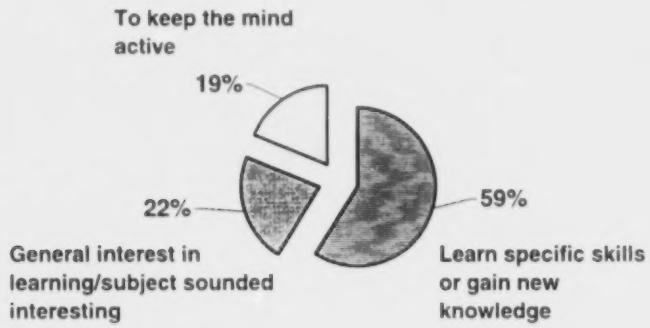


Figure 15: Participants' main expectations of courses (n=28).

The majority of participants (59%) were attracted by the specific content of one or other of the pilot courses. However, an appreciable number (41%) were attracted to the courses for reasons other than content as such.

Participants were asked whether the courses met their expectations. Responses are shown in Figure 16.

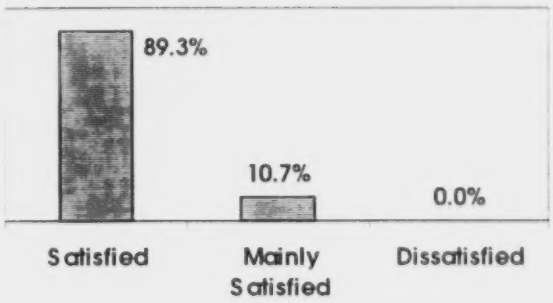


Figure 16: Level of course satisfaction (n=28).

Figure 16 shows very high satisfaction with the courses - nearly 90% were completely satisfied. This number included responses from two members who had signed up for the writing course in the mistaken belief that it was a genealogy course but, regardless, were satisfied with what they got. The three members who were not fully satisfied (10.7%) still found the course valuable.

3.3.2 Interest in continuing with Internet study

In the post-questionnaire participants were asked whether they would like to undertake other Internet courses. Responses are summarised in Figure 17.

Figure 17: Interest in doing another Internet course (n=29).

All showed a keen interest in continuing to take courses via the Internet with half wanting to continue immediately and the other half wanting a break first. None selected the 'not interested category'.

Participants were asked to list the kind of course they would prefer for future study. Responses are shown in Figure 18.

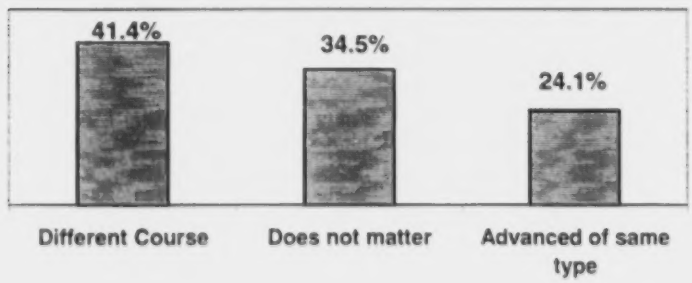


Figure 18: Type of course preferred for future study (n=29).

About one quarter of the participants would like to study more of their chosen subject in greater depth. Perhaps of greater interest to program planners is the appreciable number (75.9%) who, in choosing the other two options, appear to show that they are attracted by a generic interest in learning rather than interest in any specific subject. If this is so, members of IB are similar in this respect to the majority of Australian and New Zealand U3A members who take part in face-to-face courses regardless of the content.

3.3.3 Course duration

The pilot courses ran for eight weeks. This duration was arbitrarily chosen in the belief that eight weeks might not be too daunting a block of time for the volunteer course writers/leaders to commit to. Participants were asked to comment on the appropriateness of this eight-week block of study. Responses are shown in Figure 19.

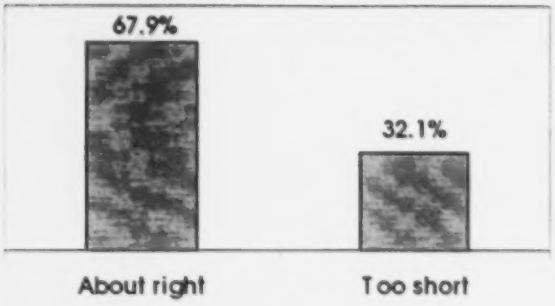


Figure 19: Perceptions of course duration (n=28).

No one felt that eight weeks was too long. Overall, about two thirds considered the duration to be 'about right', while the rest considered it to be 'too short' or 'far too short'. This suggests that it may be acceptable to run some slightly longer courses in the future if writers would like to do so.

3.3.4 Weekly time demands

In both the pre- and post-course questionnaires participants were asked to indicate, from a range of options, the number of hours per week that they would be prepared to devote to a course. Difference responses are shown in Figure 20.

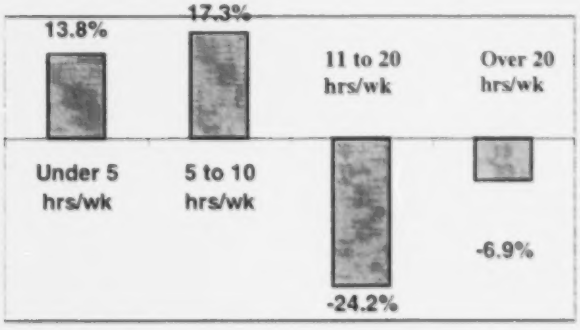


Figure 20: Changes in study time preferences, pre and post course (n=29).

Initially, many participants over estimated the amount of time they were prepared to spend on their course. After the course about a third downgraded their estimates with the majority (62%) settling on 5-10 hours as the ideal amount of time per week. Only one person upgraded his/her estimate. Responses were similar for both course groups.

Participants were asked to rate the actual time demands of their course on a 5-point scale ranging from very heavy to very light. Responses are shown in Figure 21.

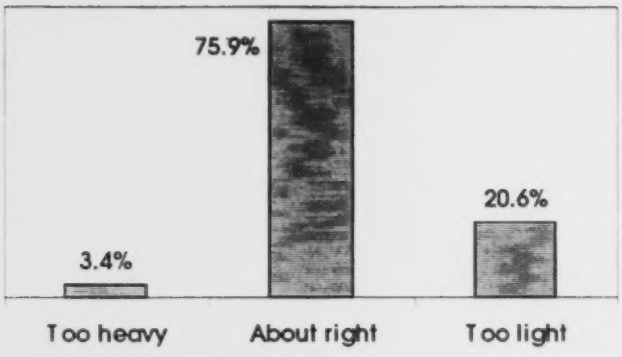


Figure 21: Time demands of course (n=29).

The majority of participants (76%) thought the time demands placed on them by the course were about right. Six of the participants (21%) found the course demands to be light or very light.

The data in Figures 20 and 21 suggest that, where possible, writers should incorporate into their weekly offerings, some optional enrichment activities that complement the lesson theme.

3.3.5 Course material perceptions

Participants were asked to select one of five options that best described their perceptions of the amount of course material they received via the Internet each week as well as the level of difficulty. Responses are summarised in Figures 22 and 23.

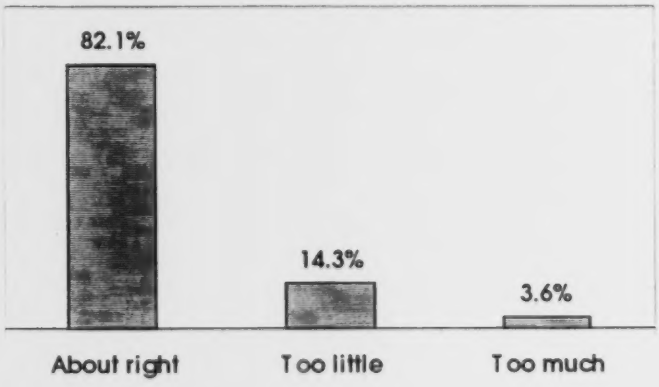


Figure 22: Amount of course material issued per week (n=28).

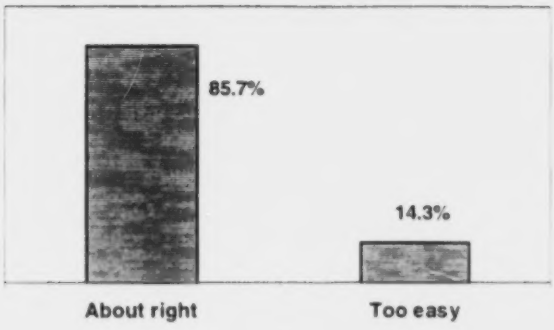


Figure 23: Level of difficulty of the material (n=28).

More than 80 percent of participants were satisfied with both the amount and level of difficulty of the course materials.

3.3.6 Course format

Participants were asked to comment on the format of the course by ticking one of 5 options ranging from very happy to very unhappy. Figure 25 shows participants' responses.

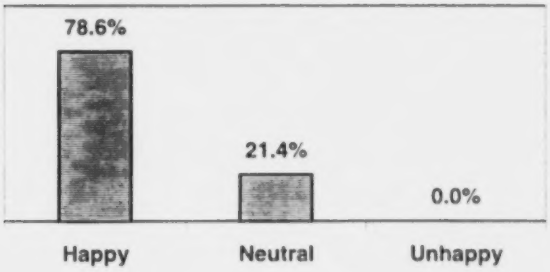


Figure 24: Reaction to the course format (n=28).

As described elsewhere in this report the two course formats were markedly different. The botany course had a heavy emphasis on diagrams and teacher-centred discussion of concepts. By contrast, the writing course was much more student-centred and required students to write their own stories and post these to the "Writers Corner" for subsequent discussion by the tutor and other course members.

No one from either course was dissatisfied with the format of his/her course. However, in general, participants in the botany course were happier with the course format (i.e., the way the course was structured) than were their writing counterparts. There are two possible explanations for this. The first centres on what participants might have imagined their Internet course would look like before the course began. Learning via the Internet is a new experience so it is possible that most participants would have had a mental image of an Internet course being something like a "text book on screen". Of the two courses the botany course would have more closely approximated this image (even though the course was much more than an electronic text book), therefore participants

may not have had to make substantial conceptual changes in order to accommodate the format of the botany course.

The second explanation relates to the technical demands on course participants. The biology course made few demands on student participation and interaction, whereas participation and interaction was a principal focus of the writing course. Two of the three main computing-related difficulties discussed earlier in Figure 14 namely, converting to text files and sending participant-generated material to interactive sites, were associated mainly with the writing course. In addition, there were four interactive "Writers' Corner" sites introduced during different stages of the writing course, and accessing these created some confusion. Once the specific computer-related difficulties with the writing course have been rectified it should be possible after the next offering of both courses to determine which, if either, of the above explanations is more likely.

3.3.7 Tutor feedback

Participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of the feedback supplied by their tutors. Responses are summarised in Figure 25.

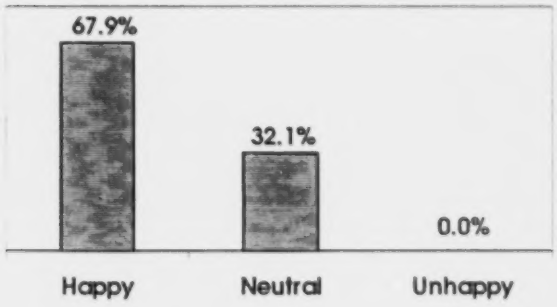


Figure 25: Participants' satisfaction with feedback from tutor (n=28).

As previously noted there were substantial differences in the levels of feedback required in both courses. The botany course writer/tutor encouraged feedback by personal e-mail to which he would respond personally or, if the issue was one of general interest, by posting the response to the course Discussion Forum following each lesson. The majority of the participants who indicated that they were neutral about tutor feedback were from the botany group and did not contribute much, if anything, throughout their course, to group discussions. The botany tutor indicated that he would have liked the group to raise more discussion items than they did.

The writing course writer/tutor interacted frequently by e-mail with each student in order to comment on his/her stories and offer constructive criticism. Students posted their stories in the "Writers' Corner", a communal area of the site, where tutor and students shared constructive comments about the stories. The tutor spent many hours a week in student feedback and found the process very demanding and, perhaps, overly demanding. Levels of student satisfaction with feedback in the writing course were very high.

No students expressed any dissatisfaction with tutor feedback.

3.3.8 Communications between course members

One of the principal aims of the IB project is to attempt to provide new avenues for interaction between course participants, many of whom are likely to be socially isolated. The use of the Internet has grown very rapidly in developed countries and appears to have considerable potential for helping older people to develop new social networks. Participants were asked to indicate, from a given list, all the methods they had used to communicate with IB members, other than their tutor (Appendix C). Communication could have been about course or non-course matters. The communication methods used are shown in Figure 26.

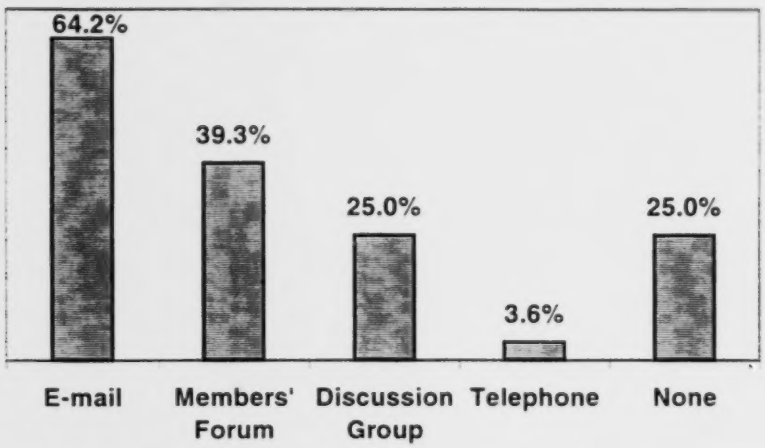


Figure 26: Method used to communicate with other course members (n=28).

The Members' Forum was open to all students in both courses as well as to tutors, administrators and selected observers. Anyone could enter a topic and anyone could comment. The Discussion Group was restricted to tutor and students in the Botany course. One Discussion Group was associated with each weekly topic. Some participants commented that they would have made more use of the Members' Forum and Discussion Groups but found the mechanism for using them awkward. E-mail was the preferred communication medium and was used by almost two-thirds of the participants to communicate with each other. E-mail is such a flexible and inexpensive medium for communication that future course writers might consider how they can use this method to encourage greater sharing of ideas between participants. Seven members of the group (25%), all from the botany course, did not interact with other course members. Among these some also failed to post the brief profiles requested by the tutor. To help participants to develop more of a sense of belonging to a learning community it would be desirable to encourage student interaction where at all possible.

In future studies it would be of interest to find out whether participants communicate about non course-related matters and whether any continue to communicate with each other after the course has concluded.

4.0 Additional Findings

Large quantities of information relevant to this study were obtained from major players in the IB process who were not course participants. These data are mainly of a qualitative nature and, as such, are not readily suited to the graphical summaries discussed in Chapter 3. For this reason these additional findings (including some suggestions from participants) have been included here. It is important to note that, for reasons of brevity, this chapter samples and summarises major points only. Many other interesting and valuable insights and suggestions have been made, and readers who require greater detail should consult the appendices associated with each section.

4.1 Late and non-starting participants

The telephone interview held during weeks four and five of the eight-week course revealed that five of the 34 participants either had not participated at all or had had little involvement in their course. Of these five one had not started and did not intend to start. The other four, including one who had not yet started, intended to complete the course. None had notified either their tutors or the administration of their situation.

There are many IB members on the course waiting list and it is likely that some of these would be happy to immediately replace course registrants who have dropped out, or who are not prepared or able to fully participate. Therefore, it would be helpful for both administrators and course leaders to know early in the course whether participants are not fully committed to the course so replacements can be made. One early warning sign may be registrants' failure to post profiles that help course members to know each other and help to establish a sense of belonging to a learning community. In future, by the end of the first week, if participants have not posted their profiles the project coordinator should contact the individuals concerned to determine their status and, if necessary, replace them. Another technique for monitoring participation would be for members to sign in each time they access their course materials (an electronic roll call).

4.2 Passive learners and course auditors

A related but separate matter from the issue of late or non-starting participants is the negative influence created by passive learners. Passive learners are course participants who enjoy the course but do not wish to contribute. As noted in Chapter 3, seven members of the botany pilot course did not communicate with either their tutor or course members, although they were happy with the course and their experience.

Interactivity is the key to creating an on-line learning community. Interactivity is also fundamental to one of the IB objectives of helping to foster new social networks between isolated, like-minded individuals. By taking course places from potential participants who would be happy to contribute fully to a course, passive learners decrease the likelihood of achieving this objective.

However, some people prefer to learn in isolation and they should not be excluded from programs like IB because of this. Perhaps a new category of IB learner could be considered such as a course "auditor". An auditor would have access to the learning materials but not to the tutor, other members and discussion sites. An auditors'

bulletin board might be created to which the tutor could post key discussion points or other information for those auditing the course.

The establishment of two levels of learner, namely the full course member and the auditor, would be an efficient way of providing more learning opportunities for the growing number of members joining IB. Apart from the passive learners many would-be full course members, who miss out on selection, may elect to audit the course rather than missing out entirely.

4.3 Advantages and disadvantages of studying via the Internet

In the post-course questionnaire participants were asked to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of studying via the Internet.

The majority of reasons listed as advantages centred around participants studying at their own pace and at times that suited them. Some stressed that they could fit conventional study around their bouts of illness or caring duties. Others saw not needing to travel as a major advantage (Appendix D).

The major disadvantages were the lack of face-to-face interaction with the tutor and other students, cost, and learning and managing new technology. One participant noted that the Internet was addictive (Appendix E).

4.4 Non technology-related difficulties

Only eight participants reported any non technology-related problems and these were minor. In Botany the main problem concerned getting supplementary books or materials. In the writing course the main problem was keeping up with the amount of reading of other participants' stories (Appendices F & I).

4.5 Comments on improving the process and the courses

4.5.1 Botany

Improving access to the Discussion Group (one associated with each week of the course) was suggested by some. It was felt that it was too difficult to access this feature, particularly to locate discussions associated with earlier lessons.

Some suggested that the first two weeks could be spread out more to lighten the load. Others requested more colour images; a desire for recommendations about textbooks to be given before the course; and a suggestion that the history lecture be presented earlier in the lecture series (Appendices G & H).

4.5.2 Writing

A number of comments centred on a need for instruction on how to carry out the computer tasks necessary for submitting stories. Some also requested greater help in navigating the site.

More formal criticism of stories was requested by some. Other comments included: the need for a wider overview at the beginning; a less stilted forum; the ability to send stories in other than .txt format; suggestions for additional topics; and some information about computers (Appendices G & H).

4.6 Development of electronic courses

The University of Canberra PAVE unit comprises a team of adult educators and electronic course designers who provided the adult education advice and technical expertise to develop the courses for online learning.

As a result of their experiences PAVE made a number of suggestions (Appendix M) including the following general sequence of steps to be followed when preparing future electronic courses.

Suggested sequence for future courses

1. Course writer to be given written guidelines and have access to previous courses as examples of how to write courses for Internet presentation.
2. Written courses to be sent to UC team. Negotiations will take place with the course writer over macro aspects of the course (e.g., organisation, style, content).
3. The UC team, where necessary, will search for web sites and scan the graphics and refer these back to the course writers for their decisions on suitability and placement.
4. Course converted to HTML, logos designed and preliminary formatting completed and course placed on a temporary web site for course writer to review and edit.
5. Changes sent to PAVE and negotiations to take place over the nature of the changes.
6. Interactive aspects will be added to the course.
7. Approval given by the course leader and IB administrator for the course to commence.
8. Course transferred to CHIRP site.

4.7 Reports and comments by tutors

The tutors raised a number of points concerning:

- Areas of responsibly
- The need for computer skills before commencing a course
- Improvements in sites so that participants and tutors can navigate them more easily
- Time demands of interactive courses
- Author rights
- Course length

Their recommendations need to be read in context (see Appendices J & K).

4.8 Technical requirements

CHIRP is a private company that contracted to design and service the U3A Online web site and work with the University of Canberra team to develop the interactive tools and to deliver the courses. CHIRP's report discusses perceived problems raised by tutors and participants, as well as detailing the technical aspects of their service (Appendix L).

4.8 Project Coordinator's report

The Project Coordinator was responsible for maintaining coherence and continuity between the many components of the project, many of which were developed in geographically widely separated places. The project is described through the coordinator's eyes and a number of practical suggestions are made (Apppendix B).

5.0 Recommendations

1. **That the IB method of providing intellectually challenging courses to a presently disadvantaged group of Australians should be continued and expanded.**

The evaluation has shown the trial to be very successful in meeting its objective of delivering meaningful courses to isolated older Australians.

2. **That IB organisers discuss the findings of this study with the National Office of Information Economics to determine whether IB can assist in helping meet NOIE's objective of encouraging older women to use the Internet.**

The majority of participants were women (72%) most over the age of 65. NOIE has identified older women as being an at-risk group in terms of its take-up of information technology. This at-risk group is the one from which IB has drawn the majority of its participants.

3. **That courses be targeted specifically at under-represented sectors of the ageing population.**

An appreciable proportion of participants was drawn from sectors of the ageing population normally poorly represented in U3A programs. These included people with minimal formal education backgrounds and people who, in their working lives, came from lower socio-economic sectors of the workforce. Social justice and equity considerations argue for efforts to be made to attract greater numbers from these sectors into IB courses.

4. **That assistance with "basic" computing skills is provided.**

A number of participants, even those claiming to very comfortable with using computers, experienced difficulties in carrying out computer activities that were essential for information exchanges within the course. Assistance with how to master these skills should be readily available.

Two possibilities come to mind. The first is online help, pitched at the level of the raw beginner, which describes in detail how to carry out each of the computer-based activities required in a course. For example, these might include how to save text files, how to retrieve "lost" files, how to attach files to e-mails etc. A "help" button from the appropriate section of a lesson may be valuable. Many participants like to print off information to read at their leisure and would probably like to print help files.

The second possibility involves "computer tutors" who might be a small cadre of U3A volunteers who could be contacted for assistance by email as the need arises. These computer tutors could be U3A volunteers from anywhere in the world. This idea would have an advantage over the online help screen idea because it would provide additional supportive human contact for participants, many of whom are likely to be socially isolated.

5. That additional aids be built into course sites to make them easier to use and navigate.

Many IB members are likely to be very new to the Internet and every effort should be made to simplify navigation around the course site and remove terms that may cause confusion. For example, a straightforward instruction like "Return to home page" was confusing for some. Did this instruction refer to the course main page or to the U3A Online home page? Similarly, a number of participants claimed that they did not enter their profiles because they did not realise that the instruction "Click here to edit profiles" also allowed them to enter their profiles.

Several sites serving the one purpose e.g., four volumes of Writers' Corner for writing, and different Discussion Groups for botany caused confusion. Many participants requested an easier way to locate prior discussions or stories than having to return to earlier lessons in order to find these. If practicable, one page consisting purely of navigation buttons to all site areas within a course, might help participants to more readily find their way around.

6. That downloading of course materials be made a routine option.

In order to minimise the time (hence cost) of online connection the majority of participants in content-based courses like botany want to download their course materials, including essential illustrations. The material for courses heavily dependent on graphics and notes should be optionally available in a format that allows "what you see is what you get" downloading (for example, using Adobe Acrobat). Course designers will need to be aware of the added jargon and technical demands that may confront participants if this recommendation is implemented.

7. That a new category of class member, the 'course auditor', be created.

One course enrollee did not begin the course; several did not begin until the third or fourth week. Neither the tutor nor project administrators knew this. In addition, seven completed the botany course but did not communicate with either the tutor or other participants, even though they enjoyed the course and rated it highly. Passive learner or non-starters contribute nothing to the ideal of developing an online learning community and impose no load on tutors. However, they deny others on the course waiting list the opportunity of fully participating.

Establishing two levels of learner, namely the full course member and the course auditor, would be a way of providing more learning opportunities for the growing number of members joining IB as well as making greater use of valuable courseware. Apart from the passive learners, who should join as auditors rather than full course members, many would-be full course members, who miss out on selection, may elect to audit the course rather than missing out entirely.

8. That an electronic roll call accompany weekly course materials.

Related to the preceding recommendation, the provision of an electronic roll call would allow tutors, administrators and other participants to know which course members have visited the course site each week. This would help to identify passive learners, as well as participants with sporadic interest in the course, who could be offered the option of

switching to course auditor status. An additional advantage of the electronic roll call is that participants would have a frequent reminder that they are not alone out there.

9. That sub-tutors might assist in courses involving a large amount of feedback and personal interaction.

The writing course involved the tutor in a large amount of reading and responding to participants' stories. Within U3A, there are many retired teachers and other suitably qualified members who might be happy to work with tutors of courses involving substantial feedback to students. If a team could be found who would be prepared to assist in this way then, in theory, there would be no need to impose course limits. This would result in very considerable cost-benefits associated with the expensive process of developing electronic courses.

10. That, where possible, tutors include a number of optional activities for each lesson.

Participants' perceptions of what is an ideal amount of time to spend on their subject each week varied widely with 5-10 hours being the most common. Most thought that 8 weeks was an ideal length for the course although some wanted longer. Optional activities would extend those who want to devote more time to their study.

Appendices

Appendix A: Tabulated data

Table 1: Age Ranges (n=29)

	Under 50	50-54	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75-79
Count	1	4	6	3	8	5	2
Percent	3.4	13.8	20.7	10.3	27.6	17.2	6.9

Table 2: Gender (n=29)

	Female	Male	Total
Botany	10	7	17
Writing	11	1	12

Table 3: Geographical location (n=29)

Large Centre (pop >20000)	Medium Centre (pop 20000-2000)	Small Centre (pop <2000)	Homestead (within 50 km from a Centre)	Homestead (more than 50 km from a Centre)
15	6	6	2	0

Table 4: Self-perceived isolation

	Large Centre	Medium Centre	Small Centre	Homestead near Centre	Total
Distance/transportation difficulties	7	6	5	2	20
Disability/poor health	15	1			16
Care-giver spending considerable time looking after ill person	3	2	1		6
Lack of people with like interests	1	1	1		4
Total	**26**	**10**	**7**	**2**	**45**

Table 5: Prior occupations of participants

	Count
Business & Self Employed & Managerial	10
Education	7
Professional (other than education) & Para-professional	5
Trade	2
Homemaker	2
Farming	2
Unskilled labour	1
Total	29

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 6: Education level (n=29)

	Count
Primary School	1
Some high school	5
Completed high school	4
Technical Certificate	5
Undergraduate Diploma	4
University Degree	6
Higher Degree	4

Table 7: Distance education experience (n=29)

	Count
No	19
Yes	10

Table 8: Preferred method of presentation (n=29)

Post-course Responses	Pre-course responses: Face to face (n=1)	Face to face & distance (n=3)	Mixed Distance (n=14)	All computer (n=11)
Face to Face (n=0)				
Face to face & distance (n=3)		1	2	
Mixed Distance (n=8)	1	1	4	2
All computer (n=18)		1	8	9

Table 9: Feelings about using the Internet for learning (n=29)

Feelings about Internet learning Post-course Response	Feelings about Internet Learning - Pre-course Response: Fearful (n=1)	Neutral (n=2)	Eager (n=12)	Very Eager (n=14)
Fearful (n=0)				
Neutral (n=3)		2		1
Eager (n=17)	1		8	8
Very eager (n=9)			4	5

Table 10: Level of comfort with using a computer (n=27)

Level of comfort level in using a computer - Post course Response	Level of comfort level in using a computer - Pre-course Response: Very uncomfortable (n=1)	Neutral (n=0)	Comfortable (n=19)	Very comfortable (n=7)
Very uncomfortable (n=1)			1	
Neutral (n=1)			1	
Comfortable (n=15)			14	2
Very comfortable (n=10)			4	5

Table 11: Computing problems (n=29)

	No	One type	Two types	Three types	Total
Botany	14	2	1		17
Writing	1	5	3	3	12

Table 12: Types of computing problems

	converting files to .txt	Downloading material	Trouble sending material
Botany	1	1	2
Writing	8	3	9

Table 13: Principal reasons for joining IB (n=29)

Learn specific skills or gain new information	59%
General interest in learning/subject sounded interesting	22%
Keep the mind active	19%

Table 14: Does the course meet participants' expectations of IB program? (n=28)

	Yes .	No	No but like the course	
Botany	15	1		16
Writing	8	2	2	12
Total	23	3	2	28

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 15: Interest in doing another Internet course (n=29)

	Yes straight away	Yes later
Writing	58.3%	41.7%
Botany	41.2%	58.8%
Total	48.3%	51.7%

Table 16: Type of course preferred for future study (n=29)

	Advanced of same type	Different Course	Does not matter
Total	7	12	10

Table 17: Perceptions of the course duration (n=28)

	About right	Too short	Far too short	Total
Writing	8	3		11
Botany	11	5	1	17

Table 18: Study time preferences, pre and post course (n=29)

		Time preference - Pre-course				
	Botany	Less than 5 hours	5-10 hours	11-20 hours	More than 20 hours	Total
Time preference- Post-course	Less than 5 hours	1	3	1		5
	5-10 hours	1	5	4		10
	11-20 hours			2		2
	More than 20 hours					
	Total	2	8	7		17
	Writing					
	Less than 5 hours		1			1
	5-10 hours		4	3	1	8
	11-20 hours			2	1	3
	More than 20 hours					
	Total		5	5	2	12

Table 19: Time demands of course (n=29)

	Heavy	About right	Light	Very light
Writing	1	10	1	
Botany		12	4	1
Total	1	22	5	1

Table 20: Perceived course 'time demands' compared with 'ideal' time (n=29)

Ideal amount of time - Post-course	Perceived time demands of course: Heavy (n=1)	About right (n=22)	Light (n=5)	Very light (n=1)
Less than 5 hours (n=6)		4	2	
5-10 hours (n=18)	1	13	3	1
11-20 hours (n=5)		5		

Table 21: Amount of course material issued per week (n=28)

	Too little	About right	Too much
Writing	2	9	1
Botany	2	14	
Total	4	23	1

Table 22: Level of difficulty of the material. (n=28)

	About right	Too easy	Far too easy
Writing	10	1	1
Botany	14	2	
Total	24	3	1

Table 23: Reaction to the course format (n=28)

	Neutral	Happy	Very happy
Writing	5	5	2
Botany	1	10	5
Total	6	15	7

Table 24: Feedback from tutor (n=28)

	Neutral	Happy	Very happy
Writing	2	6	4
Botany	7	7	2
Total	9	13	6

Table 25: Method used to communicate with other course members

	None	Members' Forum	Discussion Group	E-mail	Telephone	Total
Writing		6		11	1	18
Botany	7	5	7	7		26
Total	7	11	7	18	1	44

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Appendix B: Project coordinator's report

U3A ONLINE PROJECT

PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR'S REPORT

As this was a new project for U3A, which had not been trialed elsewhere, it was necessary for the Project Coordinator to be flexible. It was clear from the outset that many of the procedures would be developed as the project progressed. There were many unknown, untested factors. The Project Management Group of three was dispersed (Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra) and the Project Reference Group was comprised of eight members representing Australian States, as well as two members each from New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Communication with the working group was at times frustrating. There is nothing like face-to-face discussion to bounce ideas and to get quick reactions. But with modern technology and patience (on my part), I believe I was able to keep all informed of progress and to act quickly on instructions passed to me.

Office space was allocated within the Adult Learning Australia premises (ALA being the Project Manager). Although not always happy with the "managerial" guidance and support, I appreciate that ALA is a small office running many projects and operating on a tight budget. However, it was most convenient to have all office facilities at hand and to be working with a very harmonious group.

It was clear that once the wheels were set in motion the project took on its own momentum - the potential was only limited by the vision. The Project Coordinator's role developed as the project gathered speed.

The first benchmark was the establishment of a website. After many e-mails and a face-to-face meeting, a contract with Chirp Web Design was agreed upon setting out the perceived functions of the site. This was an exciting period. It was always envisaged that the site would continually change and evolve, but the scope of the technology seemed to move faster than I, at times, could comprehend. No sooner was a facility in place, and it was being modified or improved. While the project maintains its progressive management team and with the innovative mind of the website designer, I do not think the U3A Online site will ever be static.

It was also very interesting watching the development of the courses and working with the University of Canberra and liaising with the course writers.

Promotion of the project was a high priority at the beginning, identifying and contacting government bodies and national, state and local organisations whose members could benefit from U3A Online. These included National Carers Association, Deaf Association, Council of the Ageing, Veterans Affairs, Writers Group, Retirement Homes, Multiple Choice, Australian Coalition, Rural Resources Centre, Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association, Office of Rural Communities, Adult Education Resource and Information Service. These groups were contacted at lease twice in the early stages to keep them informed of progress. Media releases and flyers were also distributed.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U3As in Australia and New Zealand were kept informed of the project by regular Newsletters (four were sent - December 1998, February 1999, April 1999 and June 1999) and were encouraged to distribute flyers and use media releases in their local area. Some, particularly those with a representative on the PRG, worked very hard at promoting the project. However, due to lack of feedback, it seems many U3As took very little interest in the project. That aside, I believe it was, and is, important to keep them informed and to nurture them to take 'ownership' of the site and to use it to their own advantage. But encouragement came through the efforts of one U3A member in Adelaide (Colin Lawton) who had a 'Letter to the Editor' promoting the project published in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, and from this we received many enquiries and members. South Australia has the highest IB membership. The Cairns area has also benefited from an active PRG member.

During December a number of television and radio stations were contacted in the hope they would interview the Project Director. None of these proved fruitful. Eventually radio interviews were arranged with ABC Bathurst, Mount Isa and Singapore Radio. Advertisements were placed in *The Australian* (27/2/99), *Australian Senior* (April 1999 edition), and *Coastal Seniors* (May edition). In March 1999, just prior to the commencement of our first two trial courses, media releases were sent to 10 newspapers, mainly country areas representing our membership. Although it is unclear to what extent this material was used, the *Adelaide Advertiser* again ran an article in one of its supplements, with a photograph of one of our first participants.

During periods of high promotion, membership increased. Over the last few months I have done no active promotion and this is reflected in the drop off in membership applications. Should future funding be confirmed, I would propose a promotion strategy initially in Western Australia and Northern Territory from where we have few members. I am convinced that continued promotion is the key to increase in membership.

Another by-product of high promotion periods was the number of general enquiries about U3A. During these periods it was clear the enquirers saw this office as being a 'national' resource centre for all U3As.

The day to day administration of the web site and membership is not onerous. I have very much enjoyed the contact with our members and helping some of them find their way through the site and to connect with courses, etc. Although the project has set a membership criterion of being for 'older, retired people living in isolation', it appears that this is impossible to control - there is no way to enforce this criterion. In fact, the Internet has no boundaries as is evident from people seeking membership from Canada, South America and the United Kingdom.

At the commencement of our first two courses in March 1999 we had 80 members. In May, 127, and as I write (17 June) 146 members.

Summary:

In the first few months, Promotion/Marketing was a high priority much time being spent in telephone contact and writing numerous letters, bulletins, newsletters, flyers, media releases, articles and progress reports. The day-to-day administration of the project has been challenging at times, especially ensuring the project remained on target and within

budget, and lately, working on budget forecasts to see the project continue beyond June 1999. My last 'benchmark' task of compiling a hard copy of the Directory has been quite time consuming, but an interesting challenge.

In retrospect the project may have benefited from more actively engaging the Programme Reference Group. It may have been advantageous to have highlighted areas where the PRG members (in small groups) could have, through the Project Coordinator, taken the lead. For example two areas come to mind: (1) Promotion - writing the media releases and identifying targets; (2) Marketing - setting up a group during the early stages of the contract identifying areas for future sponsorship or funding and formulating a marketing plan or strategy for consideration of the PMG.

In closing, it has been a pleasure to work on this exciting project. I believe it has great potential and I applaud the seemingly tireless energy and vision of Dorothy Braxton, Jack McDonell and Rick Swindell.

(Sandra Duke)

Project Coordinator

Appendix C: Choice of communication method

Participants were asked about the methods they had used to communicate with course members, excluding tutors. They were given six options: Members' Forum; Discussion Area (Botany only); E-mail; Telephone; Letter and None.

They were asked to explain why they preferred any of the stated methods.

Comments are presented separately for each course.

Members' Forum

Botany

I only used Forum & Discussion areas as I thought any comments would create further discussion from members.

People can answer if they please; it was something I found easiest after a while.

Now ready....and will join the current forum. This will be more enjoyable in future

Writing

(Although had trouble finding)...The forum was very helpful still - the ICQ thread in particular.

Didn't discover the Members' Forum until near the last week - wish I had discovered it earlier.

Because there is an opportunity for wider range of ideas. I didn't utilise this method as much as I could have. Perhaps it should be included at header of Members Page where we accessed "Quotable" etc

Enabled me to read other's comments

E-mail

Botany

Communication tended to be general. Therefore the Forum or Discussion Area did not seem suitable.

It was so easy to use.

Writing

Instant and private. Very informal.

It is so simple and replies come quickly.

Most convenient.

Convenience. Could communicate quickly anytime.

E-mail (cont.)

Because it was to specific people and always got a response, even a short one.

Easier to communicate. Can stay sort of distant but allows further involvement eg phone if friendship does progress

Because there is always an instant copy of message; it is quicker than post.

Gave me the opportunity to discuss problems (technical) with another member & we tried to help each other...

Mainly because the 'Members Forum' link preceded the main writers course front page. (with no link back to it)

Telephone

Writing

Because I am still learning how to make full use of the computer it was easier for me to use the phone.

None

Botany

Not at a level to contribute yet.

Appendix D: Advantages of study via the Internet

Participants were asked to comment on advantages of studying on the Internet.

Comments are presented separately for each course.

Botany

For me this was most successful. Ill health stops me from participating in a face to face class situation due to the fact that I never know from day to day how I will feel but with this course I was able to access the course material when I was well enough to go online. I could also communicate with my tutor at anytime as well as using the discussion area & communicating with other course participants via e-mail at a time that was suitable to me.

A person can fit it in at anytime, and lessons can be saved for later reference.

Being able to do it when I feel like it, not when I have to. Being able to do it in my own home without having to travel to a location at a specific time. Being able to do a little each day if I want to instead of 1-2 large sessions per week.

Can manage own time more effectively; don't have to travel to lectures, great expanse of research available, ease of access to tutor & other participants if required.

Can progress at own pace in space and time.

Can study in my own time; gives access to many varied and interesting sites, references etc which I could never find myself.

Do it at my convenience; can print out and go over the difficult parts several times at leisure; Better (for me anyway) not to go out and drive at night; less cost; convenience of study at home (coffee etc!).

I can do it when I have the time, not have to attend a lecture at a set time, or day, or date. Good at any time of the day or night. Can go back over notes & chase up further follow up info, at own pace. If you are too busy (travelling) this week you can do ahead or next week.

I can set my own pace; I can dig as deeply as I wish.

I can study in line with my own timetable and other activities.

Work at one's own pace. Can go over any area as often as one likes. Can pick up back lag due to sickness or other circumstances.... Able to print details & keep as a reference book. Able to follow the link to other sites.

Ease of access to material. Flexibility in time for study. (I find that late night /early morning suits me as I am free during these hours). Tutor and material linked in personal way. Excellent presentation that showed how to link to associated sites. The quality of the material was excellent.

Good for isolated people. Cheap.

I can print out the pages and read them several times, unfortunately I have been unable to save them to a floppy disk because I cannot save the graphics.

It is the best substitute for class learning, which I can't attend.

No lost time for travel; 24 hour access

Becoming familiar with modern communication tools. Easy access to research areas eg. Encyclopaedias. Possible interaction with others and learning from others.

Writing

Can do it at my pace & when I want. There's easy communication with tutor & other members of the course. Can do it all at home.

Can work at a time to suit me, can work at own pace. Don't need to go to library etc to find material. So far it doesn't cost much. I liked the way the topics or guided remarks were given but I didn't realise they were "the course" initially.

Easy access because there is no travelling. I can study when it is convenient for me - however late, early or whatever day. I can combine my interest with other responsibilities -eg caring. Meet a wide range of people with a common interest. Grow in understanding and using the Internet. Have access to other resource material through U3A marvellous.

In own time in a relaxed environment.

All can be done from one's chair at home. At 79+ years I do not like having to travel.

Being a carer I cannot get out to classes. The information supplied at the beginning of each segment was quite adequate for me to understand the subject from the very beginning (Well Done)

Can study in own home - no problems with transport, weather, access etc. Wouldn't study otherwise as very difficult to get to regular classes. Can be very flexible on time slots for study. Everything available on the net for reference re reading.

Got me started using a computer and it'll now continue. Made me think. Broadened my horizons. Gave me a chance to learn in my own home - due to medical condition (vertigo). I depend on taxis, friends & family to get out.

No time restrictions. It is the learning tool of the future.

No travel; not having to be in a set place at a specific time which suits my location; work at my own pace when I want or can.

Overcomes isolation problem.

Appendix E: Disadvantages of study via the Internet

Participants were asked to comment on disadvantages of studying on the Internet.

Comments are presented separately for each course.

Botany

Isolation. Frustration when no one responds to discussion.

Not being able to access library material.

Difficult to share with fellow students. Difficult to access study books.

The wait for replies on queries.

None provided you have access to the tutor (e.g., e-mail, Forum, Discussion Area).

Lack of face to face discussion. Need to be motivated to contact, communicate with others - no initial impetus.

Lack of personal contact.

Missing the easy interaction of ideas that occur in class discussion. It is very difficult to acquire practical (i.e. manual) skills, such as the plant inspection called for in the botany course, where immediate access to the tutor and/or fellow students is unavailable.

Not for me, other than a practical aspect of the course which could not be covered without being shown hands-on.

Only the beginning problems I had with the computer.

Server costs.

Can't think of any major ones.

Writing

Lacks the informal feedback of visual contact e.g., smiles, frowns, body language. Requires extra attention to discipline in wording of feedback, replying to messages, etc. An unanswered question to a tutor or another student can feel as bad as being ignored when you ask a question in a classroom.

Cost. My telephone is disconnected when on the net. It's addictive!

Lack of immediate feed-back, lack of direct full answers to specific questions, no discussion of ideas.

Lack of interaction with students and tutor.

Not being able to bounce ideas off other people. Not enough help when I ran into technical difficulties. More time needed when public holidays (& visitors) occur.

Frustration at times (my lack of skills).

Making brain get used to the new technology.

Students need to start off with some knowledge of the computer, hence Internet!

Appendix F: Problems encountered by participants

Participants were asked to comment on any computing or other problems.

Comments are presented separately for each course.

Computing-related problems

Botany

As a computer novice on the Internet, initially I had problems locating the site and sending material. With the help given I now feel comfortable and will be able to interact with the course participants better.

(After getting started) I couldn't print the table in Week 3. I e-mailed Chirp but got no reply.

Basically just navigating my way around the course during the first week, i.e. an orienting problem. I didn't seem to be able to do the e-mails without being on the Internet and so this uses up time which is money.

Downloading pictures to a disk.

Downloading and printing sometimes loses the images. Have to print direct from the Internet to get the images.

I had to print out the course material while I was online as the illustrations would not print out if I saved it to disk & tried to print out later.

Minor hiccup in loading images.

Unable to save the graphics. I did contact the web site by e-mail but got no reply.

Inexperience to start with. Home computer refused access although correct passwords were used. Then it refused access to Discussion Areas and still asks for password to Discussion Areas. I could not cope with posting a reply off the Internet so I replied directly from the Internet. Once I worked out how the system worked it was easy to move around. The only problem I had was using the "back" circle and going on a merry-go-round of all the pages I had been viewing.

None after initial setup sorted out

Only when using the public library based computer. OK since I have been using my own.

Using the address book and the offline work.

Computing-related problems

Writing

Being disconnected at times. Comments not being received by tutor. My e-mails not being delivered on the first attempt. Not knowing how to save to disk. Saving documents as .txt. I was afraid my original .doc would then be lost. Remembering which contributions I'd already commented on. Finding out how to enrol in the first place. Not understanding some computer 'jargon'.

Changing text formats initially. Asked to Cc to tutor when giving feedback to other writers but no "Cc" provision in feedback area.

Could not do "save to disk."

Early days - sending stories - my fault -still learning about files! Easy as it progressed.

Loss of stories. Misunderstood messages relating to same. My main disadvantage was lack of knowledge re use of computer.

Only submitting stories. I think I have it settled now. My son has been very helpful.

Problems unloading stories. I had to learn about storing files etc quite a daunting task. But happy with the results.

Slight problem at first with attachments.

Using a MacProforma 6400, I had trouble converting to 'text; for IBM clone. When that was resolved tutor did not have Claris Works 5 converter. This was resolved by e-mailing work through Chirp. At the very beginning of course I was dropped every 2 mins and changed my ISP. Seemed to spend a lot of time going from page to page on U3A web site. Could some compilation be given to students re help with word processors etc. It may help. I was more than pleased with help from the tutor on this problem.

As documented to Duncan at Chirp and Sandra Duke, I became very irritated by problems in the Writers Course web site. Especially since some other students were hitting the same problems but blaming (incorrectly) their own inexperience rather than reporting a problem.

Would like to be able to send with the post .... when the computer has problems. Ours had two trips to Melbourne and two to Bendigo during the time of the course.

It is not a problem but I do not surf the net. I have not yet mastered that.

Other problems

Botany

I had problems acquiring a 10x microscope. Isolated areas often have difficulty with delivery of orders. It would help if course material was notified before courses commence.

I posed a question in Discussion Forum re a Botany dictionary - do I need to go back to that week to see if there is any answer?

Inability to get to museums, and libraries don't seem to have the relevant books in S.A.

My own limitations!

Writing

Some of the instructions were vague. Some of the topics, or general concepts, were irrelevant to me, so I needed to choose my own direction. I didn't know if this was OK or not.

Trying to keep up with the volume of reading as well as doing own editing. Led to stress - led to fatigue - increased vertigo.

Unsure of how 'public' my stories might become so held back a bit sometimes on naming people & places. Process of 'recollecting' sometimes uncomfortable.

With so many students, I found it hard work getting their stories on the screen and reading them all. But as I have now printed most of them, have the rest of my life to study them.

Appendix G: Participants' suggestions for improving the process

Participants were asked to give suggestions on how to improve the process (eg finding, downloading, and sending material).

Comments are presented separately for each course.

Botany

I had no problems with the process except; as stated earlier, the difficulty in down loading pictures to disk although I was able to print them satisfactorily_ so it was not a real problem. With a subject such as botany, where I think illustrations are important, a lot more would have been helpful. However I recognise that this was not possible and that some students may not have programs enabling them to receive pictures. Is the answer, where illustrations would help, to have available printed material to supplement the electronic part of the course'? This contradicts, to a degree, my response to question 3 where I state that I would prefer the whole thing to be handled on a computer but this is not always practical. I tended to send my queries straight to the tutor and his answers came back to me. It took a while for me to realise that the Forum would probably have been a better place as I found the questions and answers in that area both helpful and interesting. Some control or guidance in this area might be useful.

Downloading would be good. I have a scanner, maybe that could be of use in some way?

Get everyone to put in a profile.

I believe one overall discussion page would be better.

I felt it would be better to have an ongoing discussion area rather than a new one each week.

Perhaps on a course of 8 weeks, the discussion forums could be kept together, so cumulative. Members would then feel more of a group. If an area of discussion does not interest you then you needn't read it. Otherwise if you are starting a 'new topic' you feel as if you are addressing a void.

Would it be possible to link the Forums at the end of each week. It takes a fair amount of time switching between each week. For example, to comment on week 3 when you are at week 4. It would be nice to be able to comment jointly each week. It would help if course material was notified before courses commence.

Perhaps users of computers would be better to have some "familiarisation" time. Perhaps an online "Introduction to computers" could be a subject. Would coloured graphics be possible?

I thought it was well done.

I consider that the thought put into the site is excellent and it would be difficult to better.

Writing

A little easier instruction like exactly how to save to disk. Other ways of doing things eg. I found I could cut/paste stories to read later instead of printing each out.

Diagrams or brief instructions eg. Step 1, step 2 would have helped me with sending & downloading on my own.

Instructions on how to download to a floppy disk (I printed everything off).

Direct access to contributor's profiles & contributions from the Home page. Names of those who have commented alongside the title of the contribution on the Home Page. E-mail addresses on the Home Page (listed) Minimal graphic decoration on pages in Writers' corner so that borders, backgrounds do not use up so much ink when I made a copy on paper. Simple instructions on how to save the course materials on my hard disk drive so that I don't use quite so much net time. Advice on how to use the net cheaply.

Need a faster access to submitted stories. Too much time wasted opening them up. (All four volumes of stories) should be clickable from one page. Far too slow.

Wider overview of program at the beginning, e.g., Writer Corner V. 1-4. I was not aware that there would be four volumes - why are there 4 volumes? When reading others' stories, the downloading, going back to read the next story, going to the next writer or going to an earlier volume was not a smooth quick operation. Maybe it was my computer - I don't know. Include Members forum in a different page. It was easily overlooked, by me anyway. Introduce more people to ICQ or similar. I found one other writer who used this and we had long chats.

Course & personal evaluations included to avoid repetition. How about a brief profile of all the players up front in future courses e.g., Keith, Sandra, Duncan, Ken, Rick,? Where they are, what their role is etc. Then some thought about how to reduce repetition of feedback to various people?

Appendix H: Participants' suggestions for improving the course

Participants were asked to give suggestions on how to improve their particular course for future students.

Comments are presented separately for each course.

Botany

I found the first week quite 'heavy' and suggest an orientation week prior to starting the course so that students can navigate their way around the course, put their profiles on and perhaps put a question on the Discussion Forum, so they know it all works before starting the first week's tuition.

A minor point - more colour images rather than stark black.

I enjoyed the course but ...perhaps a recommendation of a specific title (dictionary) or two at the beginning of the course would help those who wish to get one. I waited too long not knowing what I wanted. Direction re pronunciation of words. A follow on course into gardening would be great.

I feel I was being steered to use the Discussion Group, rather than the tutor. I would rather be encouraged to ask questions of the tutor. I doubt if my fellow students know any more than I do.

There was a lot of interesting material in weeks 3-8; but the treatment of basic botany in weeks 1-2 was very slight and not very explanatory. Fortunately I found a good introductory book on the same subjects, which revealed their fascination. I think these introductory weeks should be expanded, to capture that fascination.

I felt the last lesson would have encouraged students more if it was run first. I hope to follow up on the lady botanists' history, and how they were taken advantage of by the Europeans.

Course well organised.

I was pleased to have "Questions for reflection" not questions to be answered for assessment. This way you can truly follow up research further into the subject in your own direction, instead of having to provide an answer to "please" the questioner and so receive "marks". How I hate that!

Writing

A reminder near the feedback box that extended/interactive comments can be made through the Members Forum. More encouragement to comment on how the piece has been written and not just what it has been written about. Tips on things like how to link paragraphs, use strong verbs, sentence length.

Maybe a few hints on how to improve one's story - it was nice to get praise etc but I think a few ideas on better length, i.e. shortening bits etc. Sorry I am not too clear - am brain tired this week. Keith did a bonzer job!

Provide wider overview at the beginning. Forget the calender page - I found it useless in view of the lack of info in an overview. How can you plan when you don't know what is coming? Include a topic which requires a story about another person - husband/wife/mother etc. These are much harder to keep as non-fiction! Mostly the course was a happy experience and I am sorry it is over.

The forum seemed stilted in content. I had expected some form of discussion to occur but all seemed very prosaic.

Twice weekly 'online" chat times could be good. Direct "contact" with other students & tutor. Maybe issue a possible "topic of the week" beforehand - to create questions & answers. Perhaps a "reading" list of suggested library books to further studies after course completion.

Would prefer not to send stories as .txt as loss of italics, bolding etc. Can destroy readability and emphasis.

Students need to know their computer is IBM compatible. Could you put out a questionnaire prior to course, listing all the skills needed?

Using a MacProforma 6400, I had trouble converting to 'text for IBM clone. When that was resolved tutor did not have Claris Works 5 converter. This was resolved by e-mailing work through Chirp. At the very beginning of course I was dropped every 2 mins and changed my ISP. Seemed to spend a lot of time going from page to page on U3A web site. Could some compilation be given to students re word processors etc. It may help. I was more than pleased with help from the tutor on this problem.

A suggested topic - "the inventions that have occurred during our lifetimes and what effects they have had - computers, washing machines etc." Another topic - "social change - few people locked their houses 60 years ago".

Appendix I: Participants' comments from phone survey

A telephone interview was conducted during weeks four and five of the course.

Two main areas of reply emerged and the comments have been collated under these and presented separately for each course.

Computer Problems

Botany

Problem downloading, saving pictures is hard, trouble putting in profile.

Trouble converting to .txt. When downloading can't get graphics and trouble with the links. Need a way to download pictures without the text.

I have trouble downloading the graphics and now print direct.

I have to print out to get graphics.

I have trouble downloading so I now print. Had some trouble with e-mailing.

When I print out lectures I get breaks in the diagrams.

Trouble getting into site. Had little time on library computer but now have own.

Hard to interpret how to put profile in. I had trouble with attaching documents. Could have a week where we put in profiles and e-mail tutor, and practice computing skills. It is enjoyable to read the profiles but not many have put them in.

Could not send profile. Would be good to have a less complicated web page so it would load faster (486 computer).

Writing

Can't do attachments, needed help to put in profile, problem putting into .txt.

Can't save to drive "a", can't save to .txt.

I have trouble downloading a file to the Writers' Corner and in changing a file to .txt.

At first unable to save as .txt.

Problem converting files to .txt. Problem sending profile and stories. Have trouble downloading so print everything from web site. Took a couple of weeks to register, a little hard to follow instructions on web site. There is an assumption that people are very computer literate. I did not expect to have to learn a lot of new computer skills.

Need better instructions for using computer. Would be good to have an introduction to computer.

Sending files and saving files as .txt were a problem. Need a pre-computer course.

Posting stories is difficult. Instructions seem to be given for Netscape and I use Internet explorer.

Initial trouble with posting stories - instructions unclear.

Can't send stories properly. Hard to understand the instructions for using the computer.

Had trouble working out how to send the first story.

I have problems downloading and U3A page is slow to come up. Perhaps because I use a Mac.

Would be good to have an introductory computer course.

Other comments

Botany

Links in Botany were useful.

Looking at plants more.

Loving it, not too hard, linkages good and easy to use.

I am delighted with the course. I would have been miserably disappointed if it had proved not to be less scientifically based. It has directed me to resources on the Internet that I had been unable to find and which will be valuable in the future.

Good information and learning well structured. Links are good.

Fascinating but too academic a level of understanding needed. Looking at plants in a different way. Could be another course of a more practical nature. Need more illustrations.

Very informative, well explained, requires a lot of outside reading (good), I like the amount of direction, have not yet used the links very much.

Fantastic. I am enjoying the course. The links are good and I enjoy getting information in this way. I look forward to each lesson and now look at plants differently. Why not have the Discussion Areas carry on into the next week's web page or have a discussion page with all discussion topics available.

The material is clear and easy to understand. The links are good particularly the one to a Uni. in NZ. I now look more at plants when I pull them up when weeding.

The subject is too factual and technical with not enough issues for discussion. The presentation is good and the links are valuable. Could there be a common meeting time on the Internet for interaction about a topic. I am appalled at the difficulty I have memorising things.

Links are very useful. Now when I look at plants I analyse them. Because of lack of colour the diagrams are not as good as ones in books. It would be good to have sound clips to help with the pronunciation of the botanical terms. Could there be a voluntary test at the end to help us gauge how well we have gone.

A little more academic than I expected. I find it interesting and the presentation is good. Links are useful.

Enjoying it. The first two covered a vast area. The next two were more manageable. The links are handy and suitable.

I like the structured step by step approach. I do a lot of the referred reading. I don't weed the garden in the same way - keep looking at the plants. Have had to reallot time from TV to Internet.

I like the "hotwords" and the resources (links) on the computer. I have now got some books so that I can get ahead if I want to. The printouts and the material stored on disk will be used way after the course finishes. The first week was particularly heavy. For starters needed more than a week. Course could be a week longer.

The course is well put together and presented and the tutor is enthusiastic. Not enough colour pictures most diagrams are black and white. I like the formal university approach but there is not enough discussion.

The course is good but hard. It's hard to keep up with the Latin names. Presentation is excellent and the links are very good.

Writing

Very interesting, enjoying, need more time to read stories.

Not technical enough, but it may be moving that way. I am missing constructive criticism.

I would like more technical feedback (feedback I get is supportive). I did not fully understand whether I should write on each topic or select. Some parts are vague. Week 3 said that week 2 had dealt with adjectives but I could find no sign of this.

I expected creative writing so the first weeks were not to my expectations. Weeks five and six look more as I would expect. Expected more comment from tutor rather than other students. I did not expect to have to give comment to others.

I particularly like the way we are helped to "fish out memories". I am working at the course more than I thought and am now more critical of my writing.

The format is easy to handle. I seem to spend a lot of my time thinking about stories. Will there be a book at the end of the course?

Could be better system of interaction rather than an informal forum. I find I am using more time than I planned - a lot of reflection. As I am not as old as others some topics could be geared to more modern times (snapshot recent events). As I can not indulge in using the computer every day it is difficult to follow the inclusion of new stories and comments. Could there be a weekly bulletin of new enterings.

Wonderful and explained well. I am writing faster. The course has become a hobby. I find I never seem to have enough time to read all the other stories and to comment.

The course material is good and well presented.

Keith's comments helped greatly.

Appendix J: Comments by 'Writing Family History' tutor

General

This has been a stimulating experience. As anticipated, a substantial measure of experimenting and modification has been necessary on the run, but a readiness to operate in this mode, with a large measure of support and affirmation from other staff involved, have made this task satisfying.

To learn from this experience, we need to reflect on some aspects of structure and decision making.

Who is responsible for what?

- Responsibility for policy clearly rests with the Program Management Group. Since no member of this group has been designated executive officer, I found myself writing to all members when I needed guidance or a ruling.

- This is not a course in computer skills. We need to find a method by which there can be some screening of applicants and their equipment. Isolation is not, in itself, a sufficient criterion for being allowed to enrol.

- Clearly Chirp, the University of Canberra team, the ALA Project Co-ordinator, and the tutors must each contribute to the final form of the Web Site and Pages. Confusion existed as to relative areas of responsibility, and some of my requests were not met. See, especially (3) below. Each, *per se*, may be relatively trivial, but together they detracted from my satisfaction with the course. These are listed so that in any planning for the future, needs of tutors may be more adequately met.

`A list in random order of some things I want to see changed

1. Who has the final say in the copy for the course? Changes into HTML, setting up programs, etc. are clearly in the hands of the experts, but is other editing appropriate? At times, I as author/tutor wondered why changes were being made to my material.

2. Because links to new weekly session notes were inserted at the end of each week, I was not able to see the whole of my course on the screen until about halfway through the course and then, after several requests from me.

3. I asked at beginning, middle and late to have links on the front page to allow me to navigate to the four volumes of Writers' Corner. They are still not there and any who want to navigate to them have to remember which of the weekly sessions will provide the required link. (There is confusion as to who had responsibility this task; Chirp refers me to U of C, and U of C to Chirp.)

4. Despite requests that the misleading footer, *Please send comments or feedback to info@u3aonline.org.au* be removed, it still remains. While it makes sense in other parts of U3AONLINE, it does not apply to course notes. (Of less concern, the header, 'Welcome, Tutor' is unnecessary and adds clutter by appearing on every story I file.)

5. I suggest that each group of stories has a copyright claim for the author. Only one or two put their © before their name at the end of the story.

6. We need a simpler database program in the future. Far too much of my time (and no doubt of Duncan's) had to be spent responding to participants' problems in uploading their stories.

The present program demanded more sophisticated computer skills than many possessed (saving a document to a *.txt file with a new name, using a browser to find it again and upload it). Note that the uploading of copy as feedback at the end of a story (as distinct from stories) was a simple cut-and-paste from any common wp program. The question is inevitably asked, why this simpler method is not available for uploading stories. If it is not possible in the database used, I would hope that a simpler, alternative program could be found.

7. The tutor naturally needs to have a distinctive password to gain access to parts of the program which will not be revealed to members. Wile I was able to see this special format, I was not able to see the material as members saw it, (with all their problems) until I was given the user name and password which had been allocated to one of the participants. It would have been better to have access at the beginning, using a password which did not belong to a participant.

8. The names of participants should be sorted alphabetically by surname. A change within the last couple of weeks meant that the order of participants' names had been changed again with the result that searching for stories by their author's name now takes longer.

9. I (and the rest of us) will be wise to avoid saying 'U3A home page' or 'WFH home page'. If I click Home page on the toolbar,, I am taken to Netscape home page. Should I say Front page?

10. As tutor, I was able to see on the lists the new stories (with empty box for me to tick) and places where new feedback comments were added (X or O after title), so that I could validate these comments coming onto the screen. There is a request that members also be given some means of identifying when new material appears, so saving the need to scan the whole range of stories each time they open a 'volume'. Is this possible? (There are dates on the volume index which refer to when a writer last visited her site, but not to her various stories.)

11. Why have we four volumes of Writers Corner? I do not know where the decision was made, as my expectation, after the Canberra meeting, was that we would have one volume with a possible file called Archives for stories which had been on display for some weeks. Having increasing number of available volumes makes searches for a particular story cumbersome as the course proceeds. One participant complained that if she knew that more volumes would appear, she would have saved some of her stories, rather than put them all in Vol. 1 or 2, and have blanks against her name in later volumes.

    For future runs of this course, we would be better with one volume or - if this is judged to be too large a file to handle - find some other more rational basis for separating the stories, perhaps one volume for each member.

Other comments

- Advertising courses: Do not advertise a repeat of courses until the tutor has agreed.

- Pastoral care: This is another aspect of the wider evaluation that should be considered. I have found that, even with only twelve active participants, too much time is demanded, much of it in addressing lack of computer skills or inadequacy of equipment on the part of course members, which becomes evident when their stories do not appear. Chirp has been of tremendous help here, when I pass on requests to sort out members' problems, but I get caught up in it too.

- Some of the issues which I would put high on a list of items to be addressed by a group

of us before the course is offered again by myself or another tutor are:

- revise acceptance criteria for participants;
- consider whether to negotiate with Chirp for a data base which is simpler to use;
- where are the demarcation lines and responsibilities vis-a-vis writer/University of Canberra/Chirp?
- Are we well served by having four volumes of Writers Corner?
- In terms of leadership, should we have multiple staff (consider, perhaps the pattern of one lecturer supported by assistant tutors in some tertiary courses), so as to spread the load of reading and commenting?

Telephone Interview

A telephone interview held with the tutor during the fifth week of the course did not reveal any issues that were not addressed in the above written summary.

Appendix K: Comments from 'Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment' tutor

Section (I) Botany for Enjoyment and Knowledge report

Course writing for me meant reorganising the lectures I give to my face-to-face class. I guess I spent 1-2 hours for each topic before the ONLINE began. Just as I do with my live class, I felt I should be able to change some things. I think I mentioned I would have liked to include a session on plant characteristics and their use in identification. That was my extra thinking, not writing time.

Responding to queries. I adopted the system of checking the course twice a day, checking if there had been queries, replying, and as the course went on, I found I had to check the Discussion for each session, as students seem to use this area even after one or more sessions had come up. It would certainly be better to just have one Discussion Area, continuous, to serve each course. Then, I also found some sent me e-mails, instead of using the Discussion Area, so there was a lot of time spent in this way.

My intention, now is to sort through the queries I have had, whether by e-mail or Discussion Area, and see which students responded in any way. I think there were a number who made no response, but I will let you know about this when I have sorted it out.

Overall, I felt satisfied with it, and the few who let me know I had "opened new doors" gave me great satisfaction. I have had the same response in live classes. I think it would have been helpful to me to know why each student was "housebound".... I got the impression that a number of them were quite capable of getting around. If they were isolated, rather than housebound, I would understand.

I am thankful for being included in this trial period.

Section (II) Some statistics from the Botany Course

Number of students, nominally	22
Submitted profiles	12
Queries from students:	
On Course	20
Not on Course	11
Other	4
Individuals made queries or comments	11
Individuals no queries or comments	11
individuals sent thanks	8
Individuals, no profile, no query, no thanks	6

This summary is made only a few days since the course ended. I again suggest that Profiles be made obligatory before the course commences. It does seem that some may not be competent

with computers or the NET (and neither am I!!). Overall it seems satisfactory, somewhat like some face-to-face classes. There are always some who ask lots of questions and some who say nothing. At least in the face-to-face classes I do get a Profile from all.

Section (III) information from telephone interview

A telephone interview was held with the tutor during the fifth week of the course.

- ***What problems were encountered in presenting the course?***

Mechanical things in the Internet - students were slow to ask things. One or two students asked many questions. There was a problem with the arrangements of the Discussion Groups which made the process very time consuming.

There was a problem with the participants entering their profiles. There needs to be some explanation of the process. It would be of value if participants were required to enter their profiles before the class starts.

Students also had some problems downloading files.

Students should be encouraged, in some way, to e-mail more.

A prior computer competencies course would be useful.

- ***Do you feel you have personally benefited from the course?***

Yes I really enjoyed it. It gave me a 'buzz'.

- ***How could the needs of course writers and presenters be better met?***

No need to improve.

- ***Are you happy with the way the electronic groups have presented and serviced the course?***

Yes to both. Canberra University were great particularly in the way they added questions and provided all the Web links to enhance the course.

- ***Is eight weeks long enough?***

Ten weeks would have been better.

- ***Is there a need for sub-tutors to assist?***

No.

- ***Are you aware that some students had not started or were late stating? Should there be a mechanism to check this?***

No way of knowing. Yes a mechanism to check would be useful.

- ***Would you go through the process again?***

Yes. Happy to take a course twice a year.

Appendix L: CHIRP review of U3A ONLINE courses

REVIEW OF U3A ONLINE COURSES by Duncan Crombie - CHIRP

Technical requirements

The online course application is based on a number of technical tools. We run on our web server two database systems (PostgreSQL and MySQL) to handle the data associated with the courses and a server scripting language called PHP3 to extract and control this information. We also make judicious use of other programming languages including Per and JavaScript™ to enhance the interactivity of the site.

All components of the course have been created from the ground up by Chirp Web Design or have been derived from OpenSource products. This means that we have full access to the source code of each application to make changes and correct problems when they become apparent. There are obvious advantages in this over using proprietary software packages.

The site is designed to operate at a number of modes to achieve different tasks. Each person who logs in to the system is be presented with a customised view depending on their current permissions.

The major areas of responsibility are:

I. Member administration
(Chirp Web Design, Sandra Duke);
II. Generation of course material
(Tutor, Canberra University);
III. Course administration
(Tutor, Chirp Web Design);
IV. Student participation.

Member administration

The entire membership process can now be handled through the online administration pages. This includes: member application, acceptance, editing of details, application for courses and acceptance into courses. This has been developed progressively during the exemplar courses.

The areas not currently covered by the online administration are: changing usernames and passwords, assigning tutors, setting up new courses, changing the status of courses from active to inactive and vice versa. The reason for their omission is due to security concerns and inherent complexity.

Generation of course material

The course content consists of a series of HTML pages with graphics in GIF or JPEG format. In addition to the standard tags we have developed a number of customised tags that link out to the interactive components of the courses. I would like to make a distinction between course material, that is static, and the interactive components, that are dynamic and generated from a database.

The interactive components at this stage consist of: Address Book, Profiles, Discussion Forum, Guestbook, Resources and Exchange (used as Writers' Corner). Each of these components has been developed By Chirp Web Design and evolved during the two exemplar courses.

The steps taken to produce each course are as follows:

i) Content material provided by Tutor
ii) Adaptation of content for web format
iii) Conversion to HTML (including graphics)
iv) Definition of interactive components
v) Insertion of new links into HTML
vi) FTP upload of course material and conversion
vii) Preview and testing

All of these steps can be done by a single person or group of people (in this case University of Canberra). Chirp has to perform two steps: define each new course, and create an FTP account for each course. These steps can not be easily automated.

Course administration

The course administration allows the Tutor to control the content of all the interactive components. This means that he or she has the ability to edit and delete from the Resources and Discussion Forum, control what appears in the Writers' Corner, etc.

The task of administration has also included instruction in some general computer skills to some of those involved with the project. This includes issues about: printing, saving files, interacting with the course, sending e-mail and more.

Student participation

Once they are accepted into a course, each participant can create a Profile for themselves to appear in the Address Book. The Address Book displays information on each person including an e-mail link and (where provided) a photo. An e-mail can be sent to the entire class using a link at the bottom of this page.

The course material is divided into a number of Weeks or Units that become available automatically at a pre-set date. Material can be read on-line or printed for later perusal. The participants can contact the Tutor or each other through the Address Book or by using the Discussion Forum provided.

Exemplar courses

To this date there have been two courses run and completed and there is one course in progress. There have been a number of comments about the presentation and use of various sections of the courses. These have come from course participants and tutors in both courses.

Responsibility

As outlined above, the responsibility for the course material is the responsibility of the Tutor and, currently, of Canberra University. Chirp does not want to be in the position of editing this material other than the obvious such as spelling mistakes.

Computer skills

The computer skills required to interact with the courses are fairly basic and most people with access to a computer (and the Internet) are already familiar with them. We have responded to a number of people asking for assistance and have endeavoured to assist where possible. One of the areas we are working on is a 'briefing document' for new course participants.

Navigating the courses

A number of people appeared to have some confusion in knowing where they are while on the website. Some questions very specific to the Botany and WFH course have appeared in the public and members forum.

There were some requests for links to all the interactive components from the front page of the course. Since such components become available only when that Unit of the course is opened, this would require the page to be manually updated each week. This process has been made a lot easier now and in future such links may be provided by updating the course pages accordingly.

Summary

The courses, after a rough start, have proceeded as well as could be expected with a new application. During the first weeks a number of problems were noted and corrected. We gained some idea of the problems people had with using their computers and browsers and have adjusted the interface accordingly.

Following the completion of the two exemplar courses we have continued to refine the software and believe that current and future courses will benefit from the changes. We are also developing new features including online multiple-choice tests for participants. Finally, we will be drafting more detailed instructions for each of the course components.

Course specific issues

Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment

The only major complication with this course was that the tutor was unable to send e-mails to all participants at once. This was partially because of the software he was using and partially because of a lack of experience/training in the use of e-mail. Chirp offered to provide assistance at one point but the tutor was content to use the Discussion Forum for communication.

Writing Family History

The tutor and some of the participants in this course raised a number of issues with the Writers' Corner section of the course. Most of these were addressed during the course with some issues outstanding (below). There was also a problem in the last three weeks of the course when the tutor's computer was infected with the CIH virus and rendered inoperable. We were able to pass on messages from him to the class including a newsletter he had drafted.

The footer on each page of the Writers' Corner and Address Book currently links to the U3A Online feedback address. This could be changed if someone were to put forward an alternative.

Regarding the tutor's request for a simpler database for uploading stories - this is unfortunately not possible using Internet technology unless you want to severely limit the amount of text that can be uploaded.

The process we settled on after much deliberation was:

1. Save your story in plain text format (an option available in every editor),
2. Go to the Writers' Corner form,
3. Locate the file to upload to the site (using a file dialogue box).

It soon became clear that a number of people were not familiar with saving files in different formats or using the File Manager on their machines. The majority of problems were with the former. We would regard these skills as essential for using a computer on the Internet and suggest a short page of instructions be provided to participants in future with a short test file to be uploaded by each in the first week.

The problem of the tutor not being able to see the course through the eyes of a participant has been corrected by letting the tutor 'borrow' the identity of a participant and access the site using his/her password.

I think the WFH course could also have been improved if there was a Discussion Forum for the course as a whole in which questions could be asked and answered as they arose. The use of the word 'Home Page' to refer to the front page of U3A Online or WFH is fairly standard. The Home Page is the first page of that site, similar to the title page of a book. The Home button on a browser will take you to whatever page you have defined through your preferences (such as your own home page).

The interface to Writers' Corner will be improved with visitors getting some indication of what has been added since their last visit. I suggest that comments to stories go up directly rather than being previewed by the tutor, as was the case. It was at no time necessary for the tutor to edit or remove any comments from the participants.

The Writers' Corner was divided into four volumes following discussion between the tutor and University of Canberra. The division was made to reflect different milestones in the course. Unfortunately, it appears that many participants did not understand that there were multiple Volumes despite the differing titles.

General comments

We have learnt a lot of lessons in the process of providing the two exemplar courses (as no doubt you all have). The current course (Continents on the Move) is benefiting from feedback received from previous participants.

I have personally contacted all participants including the tutor of "Continents on the Move" through e-mail and given them a rough outline of how the course is set up. I have provided assistance to people who variously: couldn't find the course, had problems printing and had e-mail problems. I have also identified one incorrect e-mail address and corrected it.

Everyone appears to be communicating and the majority have already entered their profiles in the Address Book (in previous courses not everyone got around to this). By now I am hoping that some people have found the Week 1 Discussion Forum and started to contribute.

Duncan Crombie Chirp Web Design (June 1999)

Appendix M: University of Canberra reports

University of Canberra reports

Section (I)

General comments

1. Each of the tutors had different skills and ways of operating. This proved a challenge especially with regard to the extent to which the writing style and presentation should be retained, and whether major changes to content and order should be suggested. Throughout the development of the courses there were regular negotiations with the tutors. The "Writing Guidelines" document was developed to assist course writers.

2. Course material written before the University of Canberra team was assembled and operating caused some problems, and a suggested sequence is suggested below for the development of future courses. This procedure worked for the courses now under development.

3. The courses are different in nature which made it difficult in advance to determine the amount of time needed to develop a course:

   - some courses needed lots of graphics to be scanned, others had few graphics, or the graphics were already scanned;
   - some were easy to format into HTML, others were more difficult;
   - some came with all the web links, for others considerable time was spent searching for web links;
   - some came with clear and appropriate language, for others considerable editing was necessary;
   - some tutors needed lots of help, others did not.

4. Because of the pilot nature of the course there were some problems in co-ordination between the University of Canberra and CHIRP. These were overcome as interactivity and automatic linking were developed. The problems did not occur with the "Continents on the Move" course.

Responses to comments from the 'Writing Family History' tutor

1. Responsibilities

   There has been some confusion with responsibilities, especially once a course had commenced.

   Tutors need help in a number of areas: changes to the course content, problems with the technology, or just general queries. For example one tutor did not realise that he had to access the U3A site, and not the temporary site. He sent an

email to all participants and asked me whether I could check whether all had received it. Because I was not a participant I could not do so.

It was unclear to the UC team as to what their role was once a course was up and running. There needs to be a person to work with tutors on matters that arise during the course and tutors need to know who to contact for queries. One tutor suggested that be an Executive Officer from the Project Management Committee. This would be one option. The other could be a member of the UC team.

2. Writers' Corner

There were problems matching what CHIRP was setting up with what the tutor required. After negotiations the final format was not completed until after the course commenced.

The decision to use 4 Writers' Corners was made because there were submissions at different times during the course, each one after a different focus (e.g., after a discussion on story endings). It was our belief that this was the best way to allow more than one submission each week, and to allow, at the same time, submissions at different times during the course. The system used allowed previous Writer's Corners to be similar to archives, and participants would be able to look back at previous stories and get an idea of where in the course they were submitted. With only one Writers' Corner it would not be possible to see which ones were related to different parts of the course (except by the date of the submission). If the advice of the tutor after the first course is for one Writers' Corner then this should be done next time. CHIRP will need to advise on how the stories can be "archived".

3. Automatic Links

Changes to the home page of the course after they commenced were complicated because of problems with the automatic linking. This is why the Writers' Corners were not placed on the home page. The problems have since been sorted out.

4. Final Copy for the Course

The UC took the position that the course content, and the style of the presentation, were the responsibility of the tutor. The role of the Canberra team was to advise. As far as I am aware all changes to content and presentation were referred back to the tutors, and some changes suggested by people outside the team were not considered because they would change too much the nature of the course.

5. Use of Front Page and Home Page

The point made by the Writing Family History tutor about the use of the term Home Page causing confusion with some participants is a good one. We used "Writing Family History Home Page".

Principles for the development of courses

Learning through the web is quite different from learning in face to face teaching situations. A number of issues had to be addressed.

- The need for participants to feel part of a group. Being able to interact with other members of the group and with the tutor was very important. It gave them a sense of commitment to the course. A number of strategies were developed:
  - The address book provided participants with a profile of other participants, which helped to develop group cohesion and made it easier for participants to communicate with each other. The tutor was able to respond appropriately to individuals knowing a little about their background.
  - The Discussion Forum provided an opportunity for participants to become a part of the group in an academic sense, as well as in a social sense. They had the opportunity to discuss issues with each other.
  - The Calendar was provided to help participants to plan times each week when they will commit themselves to the learning.
- A variety of learning modes must be included: reading text, illustrative graphics, activities to be undertaken, web sites to link to, review questions and reflection questions. Web links, activities and questions for reflection are essential to make the course more than an electronic text book.
- The content must be challenging yet friendly in its style. The content must be presented in reasonable "chunks".

Skills needed to develop courses

The following is a list of the skills needed to develop the courses. It is difficult to find all of these skills in one person, so a cooperative team is essential. We had all of the skills within the team, with the technical maintenance being done by CHIRP.

- Principles of adult education and skills in negotiation with tutors on content, organisation, style etc.
- Graphic design and web design. Needed for the design of logos, and appropriate colours of background and text, style of text and layout of text and graphics.
- Web Search to search for suitable web sites for the course.
- Scanning to convert hard copy photos, drawings etc to produce high quality files for the website.
- Conversion of the text to HTML. Text came in a variety of forms include Word 97, Word 98, Claris Works, Microsoft Works and printed hard copy.
- Text editing to ensure appropriate spelling, grammar and formatting.
- Technical maintenance of the site.

Suggested sequence for future courses

1. Tutor to be sent written guidelines on principles of writing an electronic course.
2. Tutors to look at the previous courses to see nature of the course and of the interactivity.
3. Courses written and sent to University of Canberra. Negotiations will take place with the tutor over macro aspects of the course (e.g., organisation, style, content).
4. The UC team to search for web sites and scan the graphics where necessary. Web sites referred back to the tutors for suitability and placement within the course content.
5. Course converted to HTML, logos designed and preliminary formatting completed.
6. Course be placed on a temporary web site for tutor to review and edit.
7. Changes sent to UC team who will undertake the changes to the course. It is at this point that negotiations will take place over the nature of the changes.
8. Interactive aspects will be added to the course.
9. Approval given by the tutor for the course to commence.
10. Course transferred to CHIRP site.

Section (II)

Breakdown of steps involved in preparing courses

Process	Simple course (approx time and cost)	Complex course (approx time and cost)
1. Examine course material presented by the course presenter: adult education design, organisation of material (style, curriculum design.) Discuss course with course presenter	**55 hours @ $75/hr**	**72 hours @ $75/hr**
2. Convert base to HTML		
3. Design Logos and layout		
4. Obtain (and/or scan) graphics from Websites or other sources		
5. Formatting text and diagrams		
6. Locate suitable Websites		
7. Send (electronic) draft course to tutor for editing (via Web)		
8. Make changes to (electronic) draft		
9. Add interactive course components in consultation with CHIRP		

Appendix N: Ideas and guidelines for writing online courses

Some ideas for writing flexible learning materials for U3A Online (Rick Swindell)

Thanks for volunteering to have a go at writing a course for U3A Online. The medium is so new that little (if anything) has been published on how best to prepare and present materials for older on-line learners. We're all on a very steep learning curve with this project and I'm sure we'll find out some fascinating ideas about course development which will be of great assistance to us as writers, as well as for future U3A course writers.

A number of educational writers suggest that the way some universities and other educational providers use the Web for educational delivery by simply converting traditional university courses to web pages, or worse, just putting lecture notes on a Web page, is a serious mistake.

The Web is a "lonely" place therefore electronic courses should strive to build in aspects of social interaction as often as practicable. For example, with our isolated U3A "students" it would probably be valuable if you built in e-mail discussion about relevant aspects of your course. Where possible, it might also be useful to sensitively encourage your students to share their ideas with others in the group. (In a creative writing course this might be easier than in, say a botany course.) Many U3A tutors incorporate discussion sessions in their face-to-face courses because they know that older learners appreciate opportunities to discuss the new ideas they have been hearing about. Similarly, as you write your course materials for presentation on the Web, try and think up ways in which you might stimulate interaction and active participation from your students. It may also be helpful in many subjects not to make the course too linear - ie, an inflexible, logical progression from a fixed beginning to a single end. Adults tend to think laterally and it's good to provide opportunities for exploring interesting byways now and then.

One of my colleagues in flexible learning believes that online education of the future may entail course writers doing very little content writing per se, because the materials will already exist on the Web. Rather the talents of the course writer may well involve searching for and evaluating suitable Web sites, then writing a series of links, activities, questions etc for the students to respond to before and after visiting the selected sites. This is all speculative of course, but it is certainly a different way of thinking about using Web resources.

Apropos this, there are almost certainly many sites on the Web with excellent readings and other resources that you might wish to refer to and, perhaps, have your students visit via a hot link in your notes. (If so, the professional course designers will handle this step - you don't need to know how to do it. They will simply embed the Web addresses or URLs into your online notes, where you want these, and your students will click on the URL to visit the requisite site.) The problem is, you may not have time, or the access to fast computing resources to carry out a topic search. Therefore, if you would like to consider some sites with readings, activities and so forth for your own course but do not have the time to spend searching for appropriate sites, this is something I could arrange to have done for you as a project cost. A 'web searcher' could phone you to get some idea of what you want, then he/she would locate possible resources and send these to you for your consideration. You could then decide whether or not to include these in your course. If you'd like to try this out please contact me.

Please note that, as a matter of routine, DETYA places a copyright clause on all material it funds including materials developed for this project. I have spoken to the project officer responsible for this project and she assures me that this will not impede your ability to use your materials for teaching and teaching-related purposes after June 30, 1999. The following is an example of the kind of wording which DETYA places on professional development and teaching materials funded by the Commonwealth. This wording has been used for many projects and programs, and most teachers/trainers have found that it provides them with ample freedom to use the material for their own teaching purposes.

This work is Commonwealth copyright. It may be reproduced in whole or in part for study or training purposes, subject to the inclusion of an acknowledgment of the source and it not being used for commercial use or sale. Reproduction for purposes other than those indicated requires the written permission of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Requests and inquiries concerning reproduction and copyright should be addressed to the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, GPO Box 9880, Canberra City, ACT 2601.

The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

The following suggestions have been adapted from the publication "Developing Print Materials for Flexible Learning" by Gordon Joughin and Richard Johnstone from the Griffith University Institute for Higher Education. As discussed above, in our project we are hoping to do more with electronic U3A courses than merely placing print materials on the Web. However, the following guidelines might help you to think about ways of writing your materials in a systematic and user-friendly way. User friendliness will surely be an important aspect of helping to acclimatise our isolated learners with a medium that many are quite likely to be very nervous about.

Use an appropriate style

Don't forget you are writing for U3A students. Teaching/learning materials are not academic treatises. They should be written in a style that will help U3A students to learn. Here are some style guidelines derived from Rowntree and Race.

- Be informal and conversational - imagine you are talking to a single student.
- Be personal. Refer to yourself as 'I' and the students as 'you'.
- Remember who your learners are as you talk to them.
- Write clearly; explain difficult or unfamiliar terms; avoid unnecessary jargon.
- Anticipate difficulties your students may have.
- Use lots of headings and sub-headings to structure your writing.
- Use action language - active rather than passive voice.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Use charts, tables and other graphic devices where appropriate.
- Consider how much students can be reasonably expected to read. Remember we are initially writing a course of 8 weeks.

Introducing the topic

- Give each topic a meaningful title.
- Briefly introduce each topic to explain why it is important or interesting.

Give students a sense of direction

- Write objectives for each topic.
- Objectives indicate clearly what the students should be able to do after completing the topic.
- Are your objectives achievable?

Build on students' knowledge

- Materials should help students to be aware of what they already know as a basis for further learning. You might do this in some of the following ways.
- Recap relevant aspects of the subject to show students how what they have already learnt provides a platform for what is coming up.
- Ask students to recap key principles from the preceding topics.
- Explain to students how they already have experience of aspects of the topic.
- Ask students to give examples of their own experience of the topic.

Readings

You may want to include readings with your course materials. Some advantages of readings are:

- Students have direct access to primary and secondary sources. (It would be ideal if you could find readings on the Web. These could be included as hot links when your course is professionally developed.)
- Students are exposed to a variety of perspectives.
- Students can often approach readings more critically than they can your own comments
- You don't have to write as much.
- If you decide to include readings remember the following:
- Integrate readings into your materials
- Keep the amount of reading manageable.
- Provide appropriate activities with the readings.

Active learning

- Regularly invite the students to apply new ideas.
- Explain the purpose of each activity.
- Include a variety of activities if possible, for example:
- Recalling an incident in the learner's experience and noting key aspects;
- Identifying key ideas in an article;
- Relating ideas to a concrete situation;
- Analysing or critiquing a reading according to certain criteria;
- Summarising;
- Responding to questions.
- Make sure the activities are sufficiently challenging.

- Provide feedback on activities.
- Consider setting a small self-quiz at the end of each major section as a summary and to reinforce what has been learnt.

Summarising

- Draw each topic to a conclusion.
- Invite students to summarise or reflect on topics.

Additional guidelines for writing online courses (Noel Vanzetti)

The development of a course for Isolated Bytes is a joint effort of the course writers and the professional team at the University of Canberra. We would suggest that you write your course taking account of the points listed below and the principles on writing supplied to you by Rick Swindell. The team at the University of Canberra will provide any assistance that you require. Our contact address is vanzetti@education.canberra.edu.au

Welcome/Introductory Page

The following should be included.

- A welcome message to participants, including a brief statement about the nature of the course.
- A more detailed course outline. This is important because the course will be released week by week and the participants need to have an overall idea of the direction of the course. Ways of learning a participating in the course, including how the participants will gain most from the course.
- The types of interaction envisaged between tutor and participants including e-mail, discussions, and submission of student work if appropriate.
- A list of general readings additional to the information contained on the web site, but it is important to remember that participants in Isolated Bytes will not have ready access to libraries or bookshops.

Weekly Sessions

For each week the following should be included where possible:

- Outcomes for the week;
- Review of previous week;
- Content - using the principles in the paper supplied by Rick Swindell;
- A summary at the end;
- Activities off the computer which may include readings, reflections, visits, and interviews. Where possible activities should be incorporated within the session as well as at the end. Activities should be aimed at assisting the understanding of the topic, and for extending the participants who want to delve deeper into the topic. Discussion questions should be included as a focus for the discussion forum for that week. These questions should be worded to encourage discussion rather than be questions that require only factual answers;
- Suitable web links for participants to extend their learning should be included for each week. If you are not sure of web links the team at the University of Canberra will be able to undertake a search for you.

Other areas to Consider

- Graphics are important to enhance the learning and to improve the look of the course. They can be colour photographs, black and white drawings, or slides, but they must be of good quality for displaying on the web. Originals can be scanned and returned. Jokes and cartoons also add interest to a session. Too many graphics can slow down the loading of pages especially over the slower networks, so choose carefully. Include on at least two occasions the request that each participant sends you a personal e-mail to tell you how they are going in the course. This will encourage the participants to continue in the course, and to allow you to solve any problems which participants may have been reluctant to tell you about. Appropriate times would be after the 3rd and 6th weeks.

Appendix O: Setting up and running the U3A Online project

The following report was written by Jack McDonell a member of the Project Management Group. It comments on matters that are outside the scope of the evaluation study. Nevertheless, it has been included in this report because it provides information on both product and process that could be of assistance to others who are planning to implement electronic projects of a similar nature to U3A Online.

The news of the receipt of the grant took us all by surprise. We had no plans, at that stage, for anything which would require that amount of funds. A structure had to be assembled quickly.

There was no question of creating a new organisation, in any formal way, for the purpose of designing and managing the project. There was not time for that and, in any case, the management group was already specified in the terms of the contract with DETYA. It was quickly realised, by that group, that they would need to take swift decisions but that they would also need advice on a number of matters before doing so. So they set about creating a 'Project Reference Group' (PRG) from among U3A members with whom the concept of Isolated Bytes had been generally discussed in 'pre-grant' times. Fortunately these people were widely spread and it seemed relatively easy to recruit a PRG having at least one person in each Australian State and Territory and at the same time keep the group relatively small. From the outset there were also two members of the PRG in New Zealand and two in the UK. In the event, it was not possible to identify a potential PRG member from Western Australia, but otherwise this group has continued with that planned representative spread of membership. A listserv was set up to cover the group and all communication with its members has been through that e-mail medium.

The decision was quickly taken that the operational centre would be the ALA office in Canberra and so a Project Co-ordinator had to be found in that city. Fortunately, an experienced administrator, Sandra Duke, was quickly found and appointed. As noted elsewhere, the major early decisions were the appointment of the University of Canberra group for course development and Chirp Web Design for creating the web site. It was felt important, because of the need to do things quickly, to use Canberra-based organisations for these functions so that there could be easy communication with them from the ALA office.

Meetings of the Project Management Group (PMG) were held at least monthly, by teleconference, with agendas agreed to in advance, by e-mail. An early decision was to make particular members of the PMG the prime contacts for major parts of the project. Thus Rick Swindell looked after all matters concerning the development of the courses, so that communication between the PMG and the University of Canberra Group was conducted through him. Similarly, Jack McDonell was responsible for the development of the website and for communication with Chirp on design matters, while Tony Brown and Mary Hannan looked after contractual communications with DETYA.

Early in the process it was felt necessary for Jack and Rick to travel to Canberra to meet the principal people with whom they were exchanging e-mails and to spend some time in direct discussions with them. This turned out to be a very useful exercise and was repeated at a later stage.

Once the basic design of the web site was settled, the materials for its various pages had to be assembled. Compiling the Directory of Australian and New Zealand U3As was a major task. Letters were sent to every known U3A, requesting data for inclusion in the Directory. The replies were received at the project office and then came the task of entering all the details in the database provided by Chirp and accessed from a separate 'U3A Online Administration' site.

Members of the PRG in various States and New Zealand agreed to do this work for the U3As in their areas, so copies of the written information was mailed from Canberra to them.

Other tasks have also been decentralised. For example, when the U3A News page was added to the site it was decided to accept items from anyone who wished to submit them but for an Editor to review submitted items before they were posted on the News page. (This has proved to be wise; for example, it has enabled the interception of some 'news' items which were simply commercial advertising.) The Editor is one of the PRG and the fact of his being a resident of Darwin is of no consequence as far as the effectiveness of the process is concerned.

Nevertheless, the brunt of the administrative and planning work, apart from that of the Project Co-ordinator, has been carried by the members of the PMG. One member of that group reports having accumulated a total of 1630 e-mail messages (received and sent) in the U3A Online folders of his mailer. This needs to be recognised and plans made to spread the load more widely as the project develops beyond this experimental stage. Its relationship with ALA also needs to be formalised beyond the ad hoc arrangement adopted so far.

Although the provision of the Isolated Bytes courses is the most prominent feature of the project and the one which, naturally, receives the most publicity, the importance of the 'U3A resources' components should not be overlooked. Hitherto, the U3A movement in Australia has suffered from the lack of a central point of communication between U3As – a place to which they can go to find out what is happening in other parts of the country and where they can exchange ideas about developments within their own programs or in their external environment. The idea of a national resource centre for U3As has often been mooted but never realised. Now, U3A Online provides a solid nucleus for such a resource centre. Its Directory of U3As is comprehensive. Its U3A Resources page provides many guides to resources that could be useful to U3As and to individual U3A classes is capable of much more development. The Calendar of U3A-related events, to which anyone can add items and comments, has obvious value, as does the Forum, where messages about a variety of topics of interest to U3A members are exchanged. There is obviously the potential for considerable extension, through this site, of the services it can offer to U3As and their members.

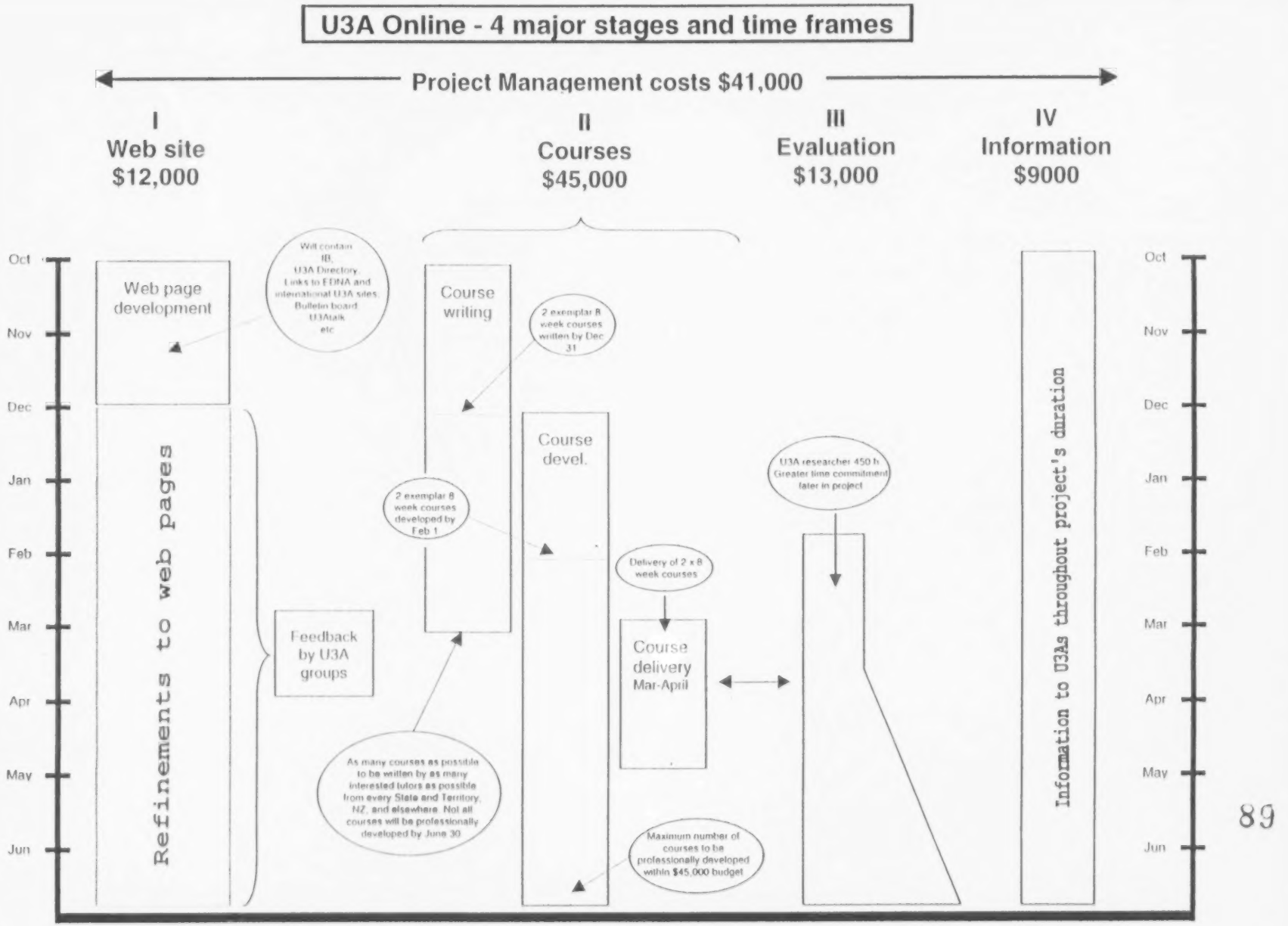
An important early decision relating to the operation of the Isolated Bytes courses was in the method of their administration. The brief was to provide courses for isolated older people. The problem was identifying such people through the Internet. The solution adopted was the creation of a 'virtual U3A' IB-U3A whose operations paralleled those of a regular U3A. Individuals find a description of IB-U3A, with a brief summary of what it offers, on the U3A Online web site, where they are also invited to complete and submit a membership application form. At this point it is explained that these courses are designed for isolated older people and the potential member is asked, in effect, to declare that he or she fits such a description. It was felt not to be practicable to ask potential members for 'evidence' of their 'isolation'. This could have been too intrusive. They were taken on trust and, so far, it seems that this trust has been justified.

Once accepted, by the Project Co-ordinator, as a IB-U3A members, these persons are allocated individual usernames and passwords which give them access to an IB-U3A Members' site, containing a newsletter with full details of available courses and an application for registration for any of those courses. These registrations are processed through the U3A Online Administration site and those accepted before the maximum course size is reached are duly advised and their records on host computer adjusted to give them access to the course materials. After a course is completed, the status of the participants is changed to 'Read only', so that they have access to the course materials for purpose of review and further study for another two months.

Much will need to be done to secure the future of U3A Online. It needs underpinning with a

more formal organisational structure that can enter into a partnership relationship with ALA. It needs a larger corps of voluntary workers to provide management oversight and to take over many operational tasks. It needs some assurance of recurrent funding since, unlike the usual U3A, it requires considerable expenditure for professional course development and for web site development; and it is difficult to see how it could operate with voluntary administration. This funding could be a mix of government grants, commercial sponsorship and subscriptions. It needs constant promotion to attract IB-U3A members and constant feedback from them to ensure that, as far as is possible, it is meeting their needs. It needs to recruit a steady supply of volunteer course writers. All these things are possible; the challenge is to make them happen.

Appendix P: U3A Online - Major stages and time frames



All funds to be spent by June 30 1999

Appendix Q: Pre-course questionnaire

CONFIDENTIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Although some questions may seem somewhat personal please recall that only the two U3A researchers will see these completed forms. Your answers will help us to describe in general terms the diverse backgrounds of isolated people who are attracted to the IB-U3A idea. In turn, this will help us to attract future funding for the development of additional courses for you and others.

Name:	
Phone Number:	( ) Area Code
E-mail address:	

1. **Age Range:** (Please tick one)

Under 50	50-54	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85-90	Over 90

2. **Sex:** (Please tick one) **Female** **Male**

3. **Location:** (Please tick one)

Large centre (population over 20000)	**Medium centre** (between 2000 and 20000)	**Small centre** (under 2000)	**Homestead** (within 50 km from a centre)	**Homestead** (greater than 50 km from a centre)

4. What was your occupation before retirement? e.g., homemaker, farmer, accountant

5. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed? (Please tick one)

(1) **Primary school**	
(2) **Some high school**	
(3) **Completed high school**	
(4) **Business, technical or trade certificate or diploma**	
(5) **Undergraduate diploma**	
(6) **College or university degree**	
(7) **Higher degree**	

6. When did you last take part in a hobby or interest course involving more than 8 hours instruction? (Please tick one)

(a) Never	**(b) More than 10 years ago**	**(c) 6 to 10 years ago**	**(d) 1 to 5 years ago***	**(e) Less than 12 months ago***

* If you ticked (d) or (e) please list the name/s of the courses or activities in the space below.

7. What are your main reasons for wanting to join IB-U3A? (Put **1** in the box beside the most important reason, **2** beside the next most important, etc. Number as many as you like.)

To gain new knowledge or skills	
To escape daily routine	
To help other people	
To communicate with stimulating people	
Curiosity	
Enjoyment in doing new things	
Personal satisfaction	
Other (Please specify)	

8. Preferred course of existing offering: (Please tick one)

Writing Family History	**Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment**	**Either**

9. Please list other courses you would like to see offered in the future.

10. Have you taken part in any distance learning activities before (ie those where you don't see the instructor for most or all of the time)? (Please tick one)

YES	**NO**

When did you do your last distance learning course? **19**

Please list the name/s of course/s.

11. If you could choose a study method for U3A courses, which would you prefer? (Please tick one)

Face-to-face with tutor and colleagues	Some face-to-face and some by distance methods	All by distance, but using a mixture such as print, video, phone and computer resources	All by computer

12. When you first heard about U3A Online courses how did you feel about the idea of learning via the Internet? (Please tick one)

Very fearful	Fearful	Neutral	Eager	Very eager

13. If your course requested you to do some study such as reading before or after each session how much time per week would you be prepared to devote to such study? (Please tick one)

Less than 5 hours	5-10 hours	11-20 hours	More than 20 hours

14. About how much time a week would you be prepared to devote to all activities associated with your learning (eg, Online learning plus reading plus writing plus thinking plus listening etc)? (Please tick one)

Less than 5 hours	5-10 hours	11-20 hours	More than 20 hours

15. Have you used e-mail before? (Please tick one) YES NO

a) On average, how frequently do you use e-mail per week?

Less than 1 hour	1-5 hours	More than 5 hours

b) For how many months/years have you used e-mail?

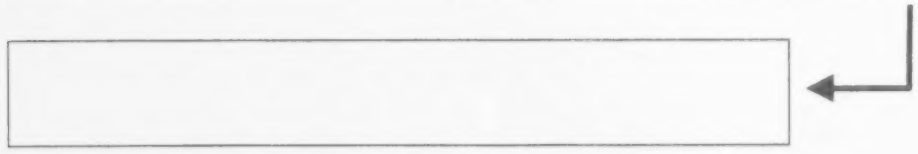
c) For what purpose(s) do you use e-mail?

16. How comfortable are you with using a computer? (Please tick one)

Very uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Neutral	Comfortable	Very comfortable

17. Where will the computer you use be located? (Please tick one)

My residence	Friend or relative's residence	Community hall or centre	Library	Some other place (please describe)



18. Do you have anyone who can help you with computer difficulties if needed? (Please tick one)

Yes	No	Not necessary

19. How do you rate your access to library resources? (Please tick one)

Very difficult access	Difficult access	Easy access

2o. **Wellbeing Profile.** Tick the most appropriate response in each row.

In my daily life I:	totally depend on others	often depend on others	sometimes depend on others	am usually independent	am always independent
I contact my doctor or health worker on average:	twice or more a week	every fortnight	about once a month	Less than once a month	almost never
I feel pain:	continually every day	sometime every day	sometimes	seldom	Never

Continued next page

20. (continued)

Tick the most appropriate response in each row.

Compared to others of my age I feel:	a lot less healthy	a little less healthy	about average	healthier than most	very healthy
I have minor health problems:	continually every day	every day	about once a week	about every 2-4 weeks	almost never
I feel better when I have something to do:	it makes no difference	not usually	sometimes	often	always
In the last 6-7 weeks my health has been:	much worse than usual	a bit worse than usual	about the same as usual	a little better than usual	a lot better than usual
In the last four weeks I visited my doctor or health worker:	more than twice a week	once or twice a week	once a fortnight	once	not at all
I would prefer to meet people rather than use the telephone or e-mail:	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
I feel that I meet other people:	nowhere near enough	not enough	as often as I want	often	very often
I have contact with other people outside my home:	once a week or less often	every couple of days	once a day	a few times a day	almost all of the day
I feel happier when I am in communication with other people:	strongly disagree	disagree	sometimes	agree	strongly agree
My daily routine is:	very boring	boring	average	interesting	very interesting
My family life is:	non-existent	Unsatisfact-ory	sometimes satisfactory	often satisfactory	very full, active and satisfying
Compared to others of my age my life is:	miserable	Unsatisfact-ory	average	satisfactory	very full and happy

21 **Please describe as fully as possible the extent to which you feel isolated. The more background you can give us the better.**

For example an isolated person might describe her/his situation as

- *I live in a large city*
- *considerable difficulty walking*
- *remain at home most days because I can't drive*
- *depend on a carer to help me with my shopping*
- *try to keep mentally alert by watching TV documentaries, doing crosswords and reading*

or

- *I live in a rural community of 3900 people*
- *No adult education activities of interest to me in the town*
- *Nearest U3A group is 30 km away*
- *can't travel there because I look after my husband who is confined to bed*

Your situation may be nothing like the above hypothetical cases but please describe as fully as possible.

U3A Online Project

Confidential Follow-up Questionnaire

Name: _____

Course completed: (Please tick) | **Writing** | **Botany** |

Dear friends,

Please fill in all the questions. Most require only a tick on the relevant box. In the open ended questions please feel free to include as much as you think necessary.

Although some questions may seem somewhat personal please recall that only the two U3A researchers will see these completed forms.

You may also note that some of the questions are the same or similar to ones in the first survey. These have been used to give us a before and after comparison.

As we are working on a tight timeline it would be appreciated if this form could be returned in the reply paid envelope, by return mail.

Many thanks for your assistance,

Rick Swindell and Ken Vassella

1. Now that you have completed this Internet course are you: (Please tick only one)

Interested in doing another Internet course straight away?	Interested in doing another Internet course but not straight away?	Not interested in doing another Internet course?

2. If you would like to take another course, would type of course would you prefer? (Please tick only one)

An advanced course in the same subject area.	A course in a different subject area.	Does not matter.

3. Now that you have completed a course using the Internet, which type of course would you prefer? (Please tick only one)

Face to face with the tutor and other students.	Some face to face and some distance methods.	All by distance but using a mixture of methods e.g. print, video, phone, computer.	All by computer.

4. Now that you have completed a course using the Internet how do you now feel about learning through this method? (Please tick only one)

Very fearful	Fearful	Neutral	Eager	Very eager

5. What do you consider the ideal total amount of time you should need to spend on this type of study course? (Please tick only one)

Less than 5 hours per week	5-10 hours per week	11-20 hours per week	More than 20 hours per week

6. How do you feel about the demands this course placed on your time? (Please tick only one)

Very heavy	Heavy	About right	Light	Very light

(continued next page)

7. How do you feel about the length of the course? (Please tick only one)

Far too long	Too long	About right	Too short	Far too short

8. How did you find the material in the course? (Please tick only one)

Far too hard	Too hard	About right	Too easy	Far too easy

9. How did you feel about the format of the course? (Please tick only one)

Very unhappy	Unhappy	Neutral	Happy	Very happy

10. How happy were you with the feedback supplied by the tutor? (Please tick only one)

Very unhappy	Unhappy	Neutral	Happy	Very happy

11. How did you find the amount of material presented per week? (Please tick only one)

Far too little	Too little	About right	Too much	Far too much

12. How much e-mail discussion occurred with your tutor? (Please tick only one)

A lot	Some	Very little	None at all

13. How much communication occurred with other members of the course? (Please tick only one)

A lot	Some	Very little	None at all

(continued next page)

14. Which of the following methods have you used to communicate with other Isolated Byte members, excluding your tutors? (The communication may have been about course or non-course matters) **(Tick all that apply)**

None	Members' Forum	Discussion Area (Botany course only)	E-mail	Telephone	Letter

15. If you preferred any of the above methods, please explain why.

16. How comfortable are you now in using the computer? (Please tick only one)

Very uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Neutral	Comfortable	Very comfortable

17. What do you see as the advantages of studying via the internet?

(continued next page)

18. What do you see as the <u>disadvantages</u> of studying via the Internet?

21. What computing related problems have you encountered during the course?

22. What other problems have you encountered?

24. Have you any other suggestions, which would make the process better? (For example, finding things on the home page or on the course pages, sending and downloading material) Indulge in lateral thinking if you wish (Don't feel restricted to the space below.)

(continued next page)

24. Have you any other suggestions which could make your specific course better for future students? Indulge in lateral thinking if you wish. (Don't feel restricted to the space below.)

25. **Wellbeing Profile.** Tick the most appropriate response in each row.

In my daily life I:	totally depend on others	often depend on others	sometimes depend on others	am usually independent	am always independent
I contact my doctor or health worker on average:	twice or more a week	every fortnight	about once a month	Less than once a month	almost never
I feel pain:	continually every day	sometime every day	sometimes	seldom	never
Compared to others of my age I feel:	a lot less healthy	a little less healthy	about average	healthier than most	very healthy
I have minor health problems:	continually every day	every day	about once a week	about every 2-4 weeks	almost never
I feel better when I have something to do:	it makes no difference	not usually	sometimes	often	always

(continued next page)

23. (continued)	Tick the most appropriate response in each row.

In the last 6-7 weeks my health has been:	much worse than usual	a bit worse than usual	about the same as usual	a little better than usual	a lot better than usual
In the last four weeks I visited my doctor or health worker:	more than twice a week	once or twice a week	once a fortnight	once	not at all
I would prefer to meet people rather than use the telephone or e-mail:	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
I feel that I meet other people:	nowhere near enough	not enough	as often as I want	often	very often
I have contact with other people outside my home:	once a week or less often	every couple of days	once a day	a few times a day	almost all of the day
I feel happier when I am in communication with other people:	strongly disagree	disagree	sometimes	agree	strongly agree
My daily routine is:	very boring	boring	average	interesting	very interesting
My family life is:	non-existent	unsatisfactory	sometimes satisfactory	often satisfactory	very full, active and satisfying
Compared to others of my age my life is:	miserable	unsatisfactory	average	satisfactory	very full and happy

Thanks again for your assistance.

PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM IMMEDIATELY